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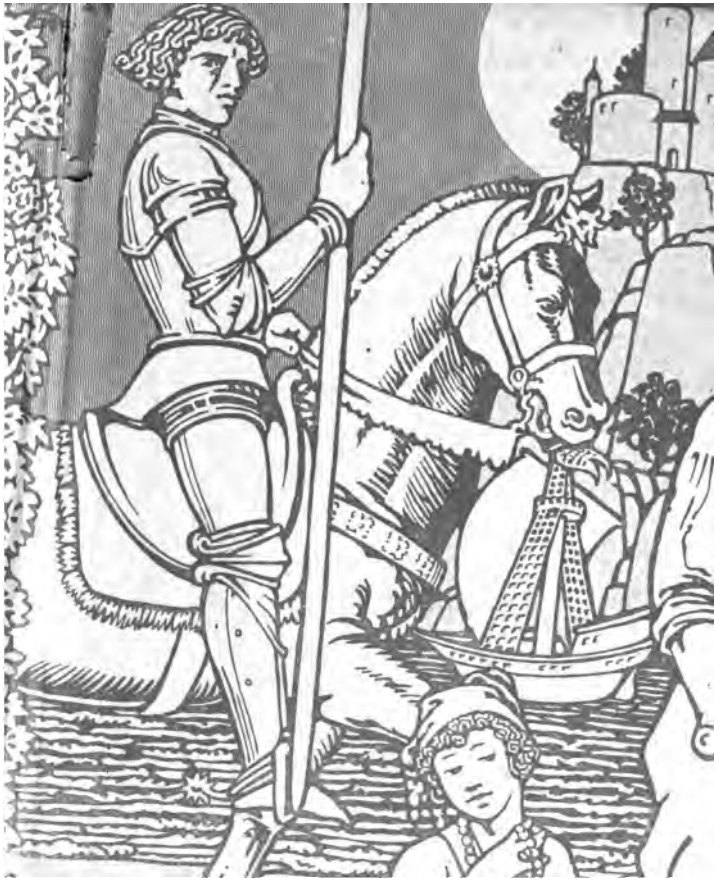
CLASS OF 1907



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Bennett – Lecture Nov. 14, 1916
Based largely on this book –

Style

I. Matter – Universal
"Editor, novelist, dramatist, critic
connoisseur of all arts." 137

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Simplicity 11 –
105
Conversational manner
34 –
Natural
Rapidity in working
Verbal precision
Fastidious use
Foreign words –
Slang
Unexpected turn
Epigram
Antithesis

III. Personality

Vivacity

Egoism 23, 35 36 [illegible]

Pleasantry 69

Satire

mild irony [illegible]

ridicule 44

Addison

Delicious

Voltaire

Buffon

Swift

Delicate humor 45 [illegible]

THE TRUTH ABOUT AN AUTHOR

Purpose

Lack of moral aim

Selfish

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Purpose { Lack of moral aim / Selfish

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Addison, Steele,

BY ARNOLD BENNETT

NOVELS

THE OLD WIVES' TALE
HELEN WITH THE HIGH HAND
THE MATADOR OF THE FIVE TOWNS
THE BOOK OF CARLOTTA
BURIED ALIVE
A GREAT MAN
LEONORA
WHOM GOD HATH JOINED
A MAN FROM THE NORTH
ANNA OF THE FIVE TOWNS
THE GLIMPSE

POCKET PHILOSOPHIES

HOW TO LIVE ON 24 HOURS A DAY
THE HUMAN MACHINE
LITERARY TASTE
MENTAL EFFICIENCY

PLAYS

CUPID AND COMMONSENSE
WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS
POLITE FARCES
MILESTONES
THE HONEYMOON

MISCELLANEOUS

THE TRUTH ABOUT AN AUTHOR
THE FEAST OF ST. FRIEND

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK

THE POCKET BOOKS

THE TRUTH ABOUT AN AUTHOR

NEW EDITION WITH PREFACE

By ARNOLD BENNETT

Author of "How to Live on 24 Hours a Day," "The Old Wives' Tale," etc.

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK

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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

Sometime in the last century I was for several years one of the most regular contributors to "The Academy," under the editorship of Mr. Lewis Hind and the ownership of Mr. Morgan Richards. The work was constant; but the pay was bad, as it too often is where a paper has ideals. I well remember the day when, by dint of amicable menaces, I got the rate raised in my favor from ten to fifteen shillings a column, with a minimum of two guineas an article for exposing the fatuity of popular idols. One evening I met Mr. Lewis Hind at the first performance of some very important play, whose name I forget, in the stalls of some theatre whose name I forget. (However, the theatre has since been demolished.) We began to talk about the "Academy, and as I was an editor myself, I felt justified in offering a little advice to a fellow-creature. "What you want in the 'Academy,'" I said, "is a sensational serial." "Yes, I know," he replied, with that careful laziness of tone which used to mark his more profound utterances, "and I should like you to write your liter-

ary autobiography for us!" In this singular manner was the notion of the following book first presented to me. It was not in the least my own notion.

I began to write the opening chapters immediately, for I was fascinated by this opportunity to tell the truth about the literary life, and my impatience would not wait. I had been earning a living by my pen for a number of years, and my experience of the business did not at all correspond with anything that I had ever read in print about the literary life, whether optimistic or pessimistic. I took a malicious and frigid pleasure, as I always do, in setting down facts which are opposed to accepted sentimental falsities; and certainly I did not spare myself. It did not occur to me, even in the midst of my immense conceit, to spare myself. But even had I been tempted to spare myself I should not have done so, because there is no surer way of damping the reader's interest than to spare oneself in a recital which concerns oneself.

The sensational serial ran in "The Academy" for about three months, but I had written it all in the spare hours of a very much shorter period than that. It was issued anonymously, partly

from discretion, and partly in the hope that the London world of letters would indulge in conjecture as to its authorship, which in theory was to be kept a dark secret. The London world of letters, however, did nothing of the kind. Everybody who had any interest in such a matter seemed to know at once the name of the author. Mr. Andrew Chatto, whose acquaintance I made just then, assured me that he was certain of the authorship of the first article, on stylistic evidence; and I found him tearing out the pages of the "Academy" and keeping them. I found also a number of other people doing the same. In fact I do not exaggerate in saying that the success of the serial was terrific—among about a hundred people. It happened to me to see quite sane and sober writing persons gurgle with joy over the mere recollection of sundry scenes in my autobiography. But Mr. Andrew Chatto, an expert of immense experience, gave me his opinion, with perhaps even more than his customary blandness, that the public would have no use for my autobiography. I could scarcely adopt his view. It seemed to me impossible that so honest a disclosure, which had caused such unholy joy in some of the most weary hearts

that London contains, should pass unheeded by a more general public.

Mr. Andrew Chatto did not publish this particular book of mine. I cannot remember if it was offered to him. But I know that it was offered to sundry other publishers before at last it found a sponsor. There was no wild competition for it, and there was no excitement in the press when it appeared. On the other hand, there was a great deal of excitement ambng my friends. The book divided my friends into two camps. A few were extraordinarily enthusiastic and delighted. But the majority were shocked. Some—and among these the most intimate and beloved—were so shocked that they could not bear to speak to me about the book, and to this day have never mentioned it to me. Frankly, I was startled. I suppose the book was too true. Many fine souls can only take the truth in very small doses, when it is the truth about some one or something they love. One of my friends—nevertheless a realistic novelist of high rank—declined to credit that I had been painting myself; he insisted on treating the central character as fictional, while admitting the events described were factual.

The reviews varied from the flaccid indifferent to the ferocious. No other book of mine ever had such a bad press, or anything like such a bad press. Why respectable and dignified organs should have been moved to fury by the publication of a work whose veracity cannot be impugned, I have never been quite able to understand; for I attacked no financial interests; I did not attack any interest; I merely destroyed a few illusions and make-believes. Yet such organs as "The Athenaeum" and "Blackwood's" dragged forward their heaviest artillery against the anonymous author. In its most virulent days "Blackwood's" could scarcely have been more murderous. Its remarks upon me will bear comparison even with its notorious attack, by the same well-known hand, on Mr. Bernard Shaw. I had, of course, ample opportunities for adjusting the balance between myself and the well-known hand, which opportunities I did not entirely neglect. Also I was convinced that the time had arrived for avowing the authorship, and I immediately included the book in the official list of my publications. Till then the dark secret had only once been divulged in the press—by Sir W. Robertson Nicoll. But this journal-

ist, whose interest in the literary life is probably unsurpassed, refrained from any criticism.

I have purposely forgotten the number of copies sold. It was the smallest in my experience of infinitesimal numbers. In due season the publishers—to my regret, and conceivably now to theirs—'remaindered' the poor red-and-green volume. And The Times Book Club, having apparently become possessed of a large stock of the work, offered it, with my name but without my authority, at a really low price. I think the first bargain was fivepence, but later sixpence was demanded. As The Times Book Club steadily continued to advertise the book, I suppose that at sixpence it must have had quite a vogue. At any rate it has been quoted from with more freedom than any other book of mine, and has indeed obviously formed the basis of dozens of articles—especially in the United States—of which the writers have omitted to offer me any share in their remuneration. I have myself bought copies of it at as high as a shilling a piece, as a speculation. And now here, after about a dozen years, is a new edition, reproducing word for word the original text in all its ingenuous self-complacency.

I

I WHO now reside permanently on that curious fourth-dimensional planet which we call the literary world; I, who follow the incredible parasitic trade of talking about what people have done, who am a sort of public weighing-machine upon which bookish wares must halt before passing from the factory to the consumer; I, who habitually think in articles, who exist by phrases; I, who seize life at the pen's point and callously wrest from it the material which I torture into confections styled essays, short stories, novels, and plays; who perceive in passion chiefly a theme, and in tragedy chiefly a "situation"; who am so morbidly avaricious of beauty that I insist on finding it where even it is not; I, in short, who have been victimized to the last degree by a literary temperament, and glory in my victimhood, am going to trace as well as I can the phenomena of the development of that idiosyncrasy from its inception to such maturity as it has

attained. To explain it, to explain it away, I shall make no attempt; I know that I cannot. I lived for a quarter of a century without guessing that I came under the category of Max Nordau's polysyllabic accusations; the trifling foolish mental discipline which stands to my credit was obtained in science schools, examination rooms, and law offices. I grew into a good man of business; and my knowledge of affairs, my faculty for the nice conduct of negotiations, my skill in suggesting an escape from a dilemma, were often employed to serve the many artists among whom, by a sheer and highly improbable accident, I was thrown. While sincerely admiring and appreciating these people, in another way I condescended to them as beings apart and peculiar, and unable to take care of themselves on the asphalt of cities; I felt towards them as a policeman at a crossing feels towards pedestrians. Proud of my hard, cool head, I used to twit them upon the disadvantages of possessing an artistic temperament. Then, one day, one of them retorted: "You've got it as badly as any of us, if you only knew it." I laughed tolerantly at the remark, but it was like a thunderclap in my

ears, a sudden and disconcerting revelation. Was I, too, an artist? I lay awake at night asking myself this question. Something hitherto dormant stirred mysteriously in me; something apparently foreign awoke in my hard, cool head, and a duality henceforth existed there. On a certain memorable day I saw tears in the eyes of a woman as she read some verses which, with journalistic versatility, I had written to the order of a musical composer. I walked straight out into the street, my heart beating like a horrid metronome. Am I an artist? I demanded; and the egotist replied: Can you doubt it?

From that moment I tacitly assumed a quite new set of possibilities, and deliberately ordered the old ruse self to exploit the self just born. And so, by encouragement and fostering, by intuition and imitation, and perhaps affectation, I gradually became the thing I am, the *djinn* that performs tricks with some emotions, a pen, and paper. And now, having shadowed forth the tale, as Browning did in the prologue to *The Ring and the Book,* I will proceed to amplify it.

> Let this old woe step on the stage again!
> Act itself o'er anew for men to judge.

II

MY dealings with literature go back, I suppose, some thirty and three years. We came together thus, literature and I. It was in a kitchen at midday, and I was waiting for my dinner, hungry and clean, in a tartan frock with a pinafore over it. I had washed my own face, and dried it, and I remember that my eyes smarted with lingering soap, and my skin was drawn by the evaporation of moisture on a cold day. I held in my hand a single leaf which had escaped from a printed book. How it came into that chubby fist I cannot recall. The reminiscence begins with it already there. I gazed hard at the paper, and pretended with all my powers to be completely absorbed in its contents; I pretended to ignore some one who was rattling saucepans at the kitchen range. On my left a very long and mysterious passage led to a pawnshop all full of black bundles. I heard my brother crying at the other end of the passage, and his noisy naughtiness offended me.

For myself, I felt excessively "good" with my paper; never since have I been so filled with the sense of perfect righteousness. Here was I, clean, quiet, sedate, studious; and there was my brother, the illiterate young Hooligan, disturbing the sacrosanct shop, and—what was worse—ignorant of his inferiority to me. Disgusted with him, I passed through the kitchen into another shop on the right, still conning the page with soapy, smarting eyes. At this point the light of memory is switched off. The printed matter, which sprang out of nothingness, vanishes back into the same.

I could not read, I could not distinguish one letter from another. I only knew that the signs and wonders constituted print, and I played at reading with intense earnestness. I actually felt learned, serious, wise, and competently superior, something like George Meredith's "Dr. Middleton." Would that I could identify this my very first literature! I review three or four hundred books annually now;* out of crass, saccharine, sentimentality, I would give a year's harvest for the volume from which that leaf was torn, nay, for the leaf alone, as though it might be a Cax-

*Written in 1900.

ton. I remember that the paper was faintly bluish in tint, veined, and rather brittle. The book was probably printed in the eighteenth century. Perhaps it was Lavater's Physiognomy or Blair's Sermons, or Burnet's Own Time. One of these three, I fancy, it must surely have been.

After the miraculous appearance and disappearance of that torn leaf, I remember almost nothing of literature for several years. I was six or so when The Ugly Duckling aroused in me the melancholy of life, gave me to see the deep sadness which pervades all romance, beauty, and adventure. I laughed heartily at the old hen-bird's wise remark that the world extended past the next field and much further; I could perceive the humour of that. But when the ugly duckling at last flew away on his strong pinions, and when he met the swans and was accepted as an equal, then I felt sorrowful, agreeably sorrowful. It seemed to me that nothing could undo, atone for, the grief and humiliations of the false duckling's early youth. I brooded over the injustice of his misfortunes for days, and the swans who welcomed him struck me as proud, cold, and supercilious in their politeness. I have never read The Ugly Duckling since those days.

It survives in my memory as a long and complex narrative, crowded with vague and mysterious allusions, and wet with the tears of things. No novel—it was a prodigious novel for me—has more deliciously disturbed me, not even "On the Eve" or "Lost Illusions." Two years later I read "Hiawatha." The picture which I formed of Minnehaha remains vividly and crudely with me; it resembles a simpering waxen doll of austere habit. Nothing else can I recall of "Hiawatha," save odd lines, and a few names such as Gitchee-Gumee. I did not much care for the tale. Soon after I read it, I see a vision of a jolly-faced house-painter graining a door. "What do you call that?" I asked him, pointing to some very peculiar piece of graining, and he replied, gravely: "That, young sir, is a wigwam to wind the moon up with." I privately decided that he must have read, not "Hiawatha," but something similar and stranger, something even more wigwammy. I dared not question him further, because he was so witty.

I remember no other literature for years. But at the age of eleven I became an author. I was at school under a master who was entirely at the mercy of the new notions that daily occurred to

him. He introduced games quite fresh to us, he taught us to fence and to do the lesser circle on the horizontal bar; he sailed model yachts for us on the foulest canal in Europe; he played us into school to a march of his own composing performed on a harmonium by himself; he started a debating society and an amateur dramatic club. He even talked about our honour, and, having mentioned it, audaciously left many important things to its care—with what frightful results I forget. Once he suffered the spell of literature, read us a poem of his own, and told us that any one who tried could write poetry. As it were to prove his statement, he ordered us all to write a poem on the subject of Courage within a week, and promised to crown the best poet with a rich gift. Having been commanded to produce a poem on the subject of Courage, I produced a poem on the subject of Courage in, what seemed to me, the most natural manner in the world. I thought of lifeboats and fire-engines, and decided on lifeboats for the mere reason that "wave" and "save" would rhyme together. A lifeboat, then, was to save the crew of a wrecked ship. Next, what *was* poetry? I desired a model structure which I might copy.

Turning to a school hymn-book I found—

A little ship was on the sea,
It was a pretty sight;
It sailed along so pleasantly
And all was calm and bright.

That stanza I adopted, and slavishly imitated. In a brief space a poem of four such stanzas was accomplished. I wrote it in cold blood, hammered it out word after word, and was much pleased with the result. On the following day I read the poem aloud to myself, and was thrilled with emotion. The dashing cruel wave that rhymed with save appeared to me intensely realistic. I failed to conceive how any poem could be better than mine. The sequel is that only one other boy besides myself had even attempted verse. One after another, each sullenly said that he had nothing to show. (How clever *I* felt!) Then I saw my rival's composition; it dealt with a fire in New York and many fire-engines; I did not care for it; I could not make sense of much of it; but I saw with painful clearness that it was as far above mine as the heaven was above the earth . . . .

"Did you write this yourself?" The master was addressing the creator of New York fire-engines.

"Yes, sir."

"All of it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You lie, sir."

It was magnificent for me. The fool, my rival, relying too fondly on the master's ignorance of modern literature, had simply transcribed entire the work of some great American recitation-monger. I received the laurel, which I fancy amounted to a shilling.

Nothing dashed by the fiasco of his poetry competition, the schoolmaster immediately instituted a competition in prose. He told us about M. Jourdain, who talked prose without knowing it, and requested us each to write a short story upon any theme we might choose to select. I produced the story with the same ease and certainty as I had produced the verse. I had no difficulty in finding a plot which satisfied me; it was concerned with a drowning accident at the seaside, and it culminated—with a remorseless naturalism that even thus early proclaimed the elective affinity between Flaubert and myself—in an inquest. It described the wonders of the deep, and I have reason to remember that

it likened the gap between the fin and the side of a fish to a pocket. In this competition I had no competitor. I, alone, had achieved fiction. I watched the master as he read my work, and I could see from his eyes and gestures that he thought it marvellously good for the boy. He spoke to me about it in a tone which I had never heard from him before and never heard again, and then, putting the manuscript in a drawer, he left us to ourselves for a few minutes.

"I'll just read it to you," said the big boy of the form, a daring but vicious rascal. He usurped the pedagogic armchair, found the manuscript, rapped the ruler on the desk, and began to read. I protested in vain. The whole class roared with laughter, and I was overcome with shame. I know that I, eleven, cried. Presently the reader stopped and scratched his head; the form waited.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Fishes have pockets! Fishes have pockets!"

The phrase was used as a missile against me for months.

The master returned with his assistant, and the latter also perused the tale.

"Very remarkable!" he sagely commented—to be sage was his foible, "very remarkable, indeed!"

Yet I can remember no further impulse to write a story for at least ten years. Despite this astonishing success, martyrdom, and glory, I forthwith abandoned fiction and went mad on water-colours.

III

THE insanity of water-colours must have continued for many years. I say insanity, because I can plainly perceive now that I had not the slightest genuine aptitude for graphic art. In the curriculum of South Kensington as taught at a provincial art school I never got beyond the stage known technically as "third-grade freehand," and even in that my "lining-in" was considered to be a little worse than mediocre. O floral forms, how laboriously I deprived you of the grace of your Hellenic convention! As for the "round" and the "antique," as for pigments, these mysteries were withheld from me by South Kensington. It was at home, drawn on by a futile but imperious fascination, that I practised them, and water-colours in particular. I never went to nature; I had not the skill, nor do I remember that I felt any sympathetic appreciation of nature. I was content to copy. I wasted the substance of uncles and aunts in a complicated and imposing

apparatus of easels, mahlsticks, boards, Whatman, camel-hair, and labelled tubes. I rose early, I cheated school and office, I outraged the sanctity of the English Sabbath, merely to satisfy an ardour of copying. I existed on the Grand Canal in Venice; at Toledo, Nuremburg, and Delft; and on slopes commanding a view of Turner's ruined abbeys, those abbeys through whose romantic windows streamed a yellow moonlight inimitable by any combination of ochre, lemon, and gamboge in my paint-box. Every replica that I produced was the history of a disillusion. With what a sanguine sweep I laid on the first broad washes—the pure blue of water, the misty rose of sun-steeped palaces, the translucent sapphire of Venetian and Spanish skies! And then what a horrible muddying ensued, what a fading-away of magic and defloriation of hopes, as in detail after detail the picture gradually lost tone and clarity! It is to my credit that I was always disgusted by the fatuity of these efforts. I have not yet ceased to wonder what precise part of the supreme purpose was served by seven or eight years of them.

From fine I turned to applied art, diverted by a periodical called "The Girl's Own Paper." For

a long period this monthly, which I now regard as quaint, but which I shall never despise, was my principal instrument of culture. It alone blew upon the spark of artistic feeling and kept it alive. I derived from it my first ideals of aesthetic and of etiquette. Under its influence my brother and myself started on a revolutionary campaign against all the accepted canons of house decoration. We invented friezes, dadoes, and panels; we cut stencils; and we carried out our bright designs through half a house. It was magnificent, glaring, and immense; it foreshadowed the modern music-hall. Visitors were shown through our rooms by parents who tried in vain to hide from us their parental complacency. The professional house-decorator was reduced to speechless admiration of our originality and extraordinary enterprise; he really was struck—he could appreciate the difficulties we had conquered.

During all this, and with a succession of examinations continually looming ahead, literature never occurred to me; it was forgotten. I worked in a room lined with perhaps a couple of thousand volumes, but I seldom opened any of them. Still, I must have read a great deal, me-

chanically, and without enthusiasm: serials, and boys' books. At twenty-one I know that I had read almost nothing of Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, and George Eliot. An adolescence devoted to water-colours has therefore made it forever impossible for me to emulate, in my functions of critic, the allusive Langism of Mr. Andrew Lang; but on the other hand, it has conferred on me the rare advantage of being in a position to approach the classics and the alleged classics with a mind entirely unprejudiced by early recollections. Thus I read David Copperfield for the first time at thirty, after I had written a book or two and some hundreds of articles myself. The one author whom as a youth I "devoured" was Ouida, creator of the incomparable Strathmore, the Strathmore upon whose wrath the sun unfortunately went down. I loved Ouida much for the impassioned nobility of her style, but more for the scenes of gilded vice into which she introduced me. She it was who inspired me with that taste for *liaisons* under pink lampshades which I shall always have, but which, owing to a puritanical ancestry and upbringing, I shall never be able to satisfy. Not even the lesson of Prince Io's mar-

tyrdom in "Friendship" could cure me of this predilection that I blush for. Yes, Ouida was the unique fountain of romance for me. Of poetry, save "Hiawatha" and the enforced and tedious Shakespeare of schools, I had read nothing.

The principal local daily offered to buy approved short stories from local readers at a guinea apiece. Immediately I wrote one. What, beyond the chance of a guinea, made me turn so suddenly to literature I cannot guess; it was eight years since I had sat down as a creative artist. But I may mention here that I have never once produced any literary work without a preliminary incentive quite other than the incentive of ebullient imagination. I have never "wanted to write," until the extrinsic advantages of writing had presented themselves to me. I cannot recall that I found any difficulty in concocting the story. The heroine was named Leonora, and after having lost sight of her for years, the hero discovered her again as a great actress in a great play. (Miss Ellen Terry in "Faust" had passed disturbingly athwart my existence.) I remember no more. The story was refused. But I firmly believe that for a boy of nineteen it was something of an achievement. No

one saw it except myself and the local editor; it was a secret, and now it is a lost secret. Soon afterwards another local newspaper advertised for a short serial of local interest. Immediately I wrote the serial, again without difficulty. It was a sinister narrative to illustrate the evils of marrying a drunken woman. (I think I had just read "L'Assommoir" in Vizetelly's original edition of Zola.) There was a street in our town named Commercial Street. I laid the scene there, and called it Speculation Street. I know not what satiric criticism of modern life was involved in that change of name. This serial too was refused; I suspect that it was entirely without serial interest.

I had matriculated at London University three years before, and was then working, without heart, for a law degree (which I never won); instead of Ouida my nights were given to Austin's Jurisprudence, the Institutes of Justinian and of Gaius, and Maine's Ancient Law; the last is a great and simple book, but it cannot be absorbed and digested while the student is pre-occupied with the art of fiction. Out of an unwilling respect for the University of London, that august negation of the very idea of a

University, I abandoned literature. As to water-colours, my tubes had dried up long since; and house-decoration was at a standstill.

The editor of the second newspaper, after a considerable interval, wrote and asked me to call on him, for all the world as though I were the impossible hero of a journalistic novel. The interview between us was one of these plagiarisms of fiction which real life is sometimes guilty of. The editor informed me that he had read my sinister serial with deep interest, and felt convinced, his refusal of it notwithstanding, that I was marked out for the literary vocation. He offered me a post on his powerful organ as a regular weekly contributor, without salary. He said that he was sure I could write the sort of stuff he wanted, and I entirely agreed with him. My serene confidence in my ability, pen in hand, to do anything that I wished to do, was thus manifest in the beginning. Glory shone around as I left the editorial office. The romantic quality of this episode is somewhat impaired by the fact, which I shall nevertheless mention, that the editor was a friend of the family, and that my father was one of several optimistic persons who were dropping money on the powerful organ

every week. The interview, however, was indeed that peculiar phenomenon (so well known to all readers of biography) styled the "turning-point in one's career." But I lacked the wit to perceive this for several years.

The esteemed newspaper to which I was now attached served several fairly large municipalities which lay so close together as to form in reality one very large town divided against itself. Each wilful cell in this organism was represented by its own special correspondent on the newspaper, and I was to be the correspondent for my native town. I had nothing to do with the news department; menial reporters attended to that. My task was to comment weekly upon the town's affairs to the extent of half a column of paragraphic notes.

"Whatever you do, you must make your pars. bright," said the editor, and he repeated the word —"Bright!"

Now I was entirely ignorant of my town's affairs. I had no suspicion of the incessant comedy of municipal life. For two days I traversed our stately thoroughfares in search of material, wondering what, in the names of Horace Greeley, James Gordon Bennett, and Mr. Delane, my first

contribution was going to consist of. Law went to the devil, its natural home. Then I happened to think of tram-lines. The tram-lines, under the blessing of Heaven, were badly laid, and constituted a menace to all wheeled traffic save trams; also the steam-engines of the trams were offensive. I wrote sundry paragraphs on that topic, and having thus acquired momentum, I arrived safely at the end of my half column by the aid of one or two minor trifles.

In due course I called at the office to correct proof, and I was put into the hands of the sub-editor. It was one of those quarters-of-an-hour that make life worth living; for the sub-editor appreciated me; nay, he regarded me as something of a journalistic prodigy, and his adjectives as he ran through the proof were extremely agreeable. Presently he came to a sentence in which I had said that such-and-such a proceeding "smacked of red tape."

"'Smacked of red tape'?" He looked up at me doubtfully. "Rather a mixed metaphor, isn't it?"

I didn't in the least know what he meant, but I knew that that sentence was my particular pet. "Not at all!" I answered with feeling. "Noth-

ing of the sort! It *does* smack of red tape—you must admit that."

And the sentence stood. I had awed the sub-editor.

My notes enjoyed a striking success. Their brightness scintillated beyond the brightness of the comments from any other town. People wondered who this caustic, cynical, and witty anonymous wag was. I myself was vastly well satisfied; I read the stuff over and over again; but at the same time I perceived that I could make my next contribution infinitely more brilliant. And I did. I mention this matter, less because it was my first appearance in print, than because it first disclosed to me the relation between literature and life. In writing my stories I had never thought for a moment of life. I had *made* something, according to a model, not dreaming that fiction was supposed to reflect real life. I had regarded fiction as—fiction, a concoction on the plane of the Grand Canal, or the Zocodover at Toledo. But in this other literature I was obliged to begin with life itself. The wheel of a dog-cart spinning off as it jammed against a projecting bit of tram-line; a cyclist overset: what was there in that? Nothing. Yet

I had taken that nothing and transformed it into something — something that seemed important, permanent, *literary*. I did not comprehend the process, but I saw its result. I do not comprehend it now. The man who could explain it could answer the oft-repeated cry: What is Art?

Soon afterwards I had a delightful illustration of the power of the press. That was the era of coffee-houses, when many excellent persons without too much humour tried all over the country to wean the populace from beer by the superior attractions of coffee and cocoa; possibly they had never tasted beer. Every town had its coffee-house company, limited. Our coffee-house happened to be a pretty bad one, while the coffee-house of the next town was conspicuously good. I said so in print, with my usual display of verbal pyrotechny. The paper had not been published an hour before the aggrieved manager of our coffee-house had seen his directors on the subject. He said I lied, that I was unpatriotic, and that he wanted my head on a charger; or words to that effect. He asked my father, who was a director of both newspaper and coffee-house, whether he could throw any light on the identity of the scurrilous and cowardly scribe,

and my father, to his eternal credit, said that he could not. Again I lived vividly and fully. As for our coffee-house, it mended its ways.

The County Council Bill had just become law, and our town enjoyed the diversions of electing its first County Councillor. The rival candidates were a brewer and a prominent lay religionist. My paper supported the latter, and referred to the conflict between the forces of civilization and the forces of barbarism. It had a magnificent heading across two columns: "Brains *versus* Beer," and expressed the most serene confidence as to the result. Of course, my weekly notes during the campaign were a shield and a buckler to the religionist, who moreover lived next door.

The result of the poll was to be announced late on the night before the paper went to press. The editor gave me instructions that *if* we lost, I was to make fun of the brewer, and in any case to deliver my copy by eleven o'clock next morning. We lost heavily, disastrously; the forces of civilization were simply nowhere. I attended the declaration of the poll, and as the elated brewer made his speech of ceremony in front of the town hall, I observed that his hat was stove-in and askew. I fastened on that detail, and went to bed in

meditation upon the facetious notes which I was to write early on the morrow. In the middle of the night I was wakened up. My venerable grandfather, who lived at the other end of the town, had been taken suddenly ill and was dying. As his eldest grandson, my presence at the final scene was indispensable. I went, and talked in low tones with my elders. Upstairs the old man was fighting for every breath. The doctor descended at intervals and said that it was only a question of hours. I was absolutely obsessed by a delicious feeling of the tyranny of the press. Nothing domestic could be permitted to interfere with my duty as a journalist.

"I must write those facetious comments while my grandfather is dying upstairs!" This thought filled my brain. It seemed to me to be fine, splendid. I was intensely proud of being laid under a compulsion so startlingly dramatic. Could I manufacture jokes while my grandfather expired? Certainly: I was a journalist. And never since have I been more ardently a journalist than I was that night and morning. With a strong sense of the theatrical, I wrote my notes at dawn. They delicately excoriated the brewer.

The curious thing is that my grandfather sur-

vived not only that, but several other fatal tacks.

A few weeks later, my newspaper was st gering under the blow of my migration to L don.

IV

I CAME to London at the age of twenty-one, with no definite ambition, and no immediate object save to escape from an intellectual and artistic environment which had long been excessively irksome to me. Some achievement of literature certainly lay in the abyss of my desires, but I allowed it to remain there, vague and almost unnoticed. As for provincial journalism, without meed in coin, it had already lost the charm of novelty, and I had been doing it in a perfunctory manner. I made no attempt to storm Fleet Street. The fact is that I was too much engaged in making a meal off London, swallowing it, to attend to anything else; this repast continued for over two years. I earned a scanty living as shorthand clerk, at first, in a solicitor's office; but a natural gift for the preparation of bills of costs for taxation, that highly delicate and complicated craft, and an equally natural gift for advancing my own interests, soon put me in receipt of an income that

many "admitted" clerks would have envied: to be exact and prosaic, two hundred a year. Another clerk in the office happened to be an ardent bibliophile. We became friends, and I owe him much. He could chatter in idiomatic French like a house on fire, and he knew the British Museum Reading Room from its centre to its periphery. He first taught me to regard a book, not as an instrument for obtaining information or emotion, but as a *book*, printed at such a place in such a year by so-and-so, bound by so-and-so, and carrying colophons, registers, water-marks, and *fautes d'impression*. He was acquainted, I think, with every second-hand bookstall in the metropolis; and on Saturday afternoons we visited most of them. We lived for bargains and rarities. We made it a point of honour to buy one book every day, and when bargains failed we used to send out the messengers for a Camelot Classic or so—ninepence net; this series was just then at the height of its vogue. We were for ever bringing into the office formidable tomes—the choice productions of the presses of Robert and Henry Stephen, Elzevir, Baskerville, Giunta, Foulis, and heaven knows whom. My discovery of the Greek *editio prin-*

ceps of Plutarch, printed by Philip Giunta at Florence in 1517, which I bought in Whitechapel for two shillings, nearly placed me on a level with my preceptor. We decidedly created a sensation in the office. The "admitted" clerks and the articled clerks, whom legal etiquette forbids as a rule to fraternize with the "unadmitted," took a naïve and unaffected pleasure in our society. One day I was examining five enormous folios full-bound in yellow calf, in the clients' waiting-room, when the senior partner surprised me thus wasting the firm's time.

"What's all this?" he inquired politely. He was far too polite to remonstrate.

"This, sir? Bayle's 'Dictionaire Historique et Critique,'" I replied.

"Is it yours?"

"Yes, sir. I bought it in the lunch-hour at Hodgson's."

"Ah!"

He retired abashed. He was a gentle fellow, and professed an admiration for Browning; but the chief thing of which he had the right to be proud was his absolutely beautiful French accent.

I had scarcely been in London a year when

my friend and I decided to collaborate in a bibliographical dictionary of rare and expensive books in all European languages. Such a scheme sounds farcical, but we were perfectly serious over it; and the proof of our seriousness is that we worked at it every morning before breakfast. I may mention also that we lunched daily at the British Museum, much to the detriment of our official duties. For months we must have been quite mad—obsessed. We got about as far as the New English Dictionary travelled in the first twenty years of its life, that is to say, two-thirds through A; and then suddenly, irrationally, without warning, we dropped it. The mere conception of this dictionary was so splendid that there was a grandeur even in dropping it.

Soon after this, the managing clerk of the office, a university man, autocratic, but kindly and sagacious, bought a country practice and left us. He called me into his room to say good-bye.

"You'd no business to be here," he said, sharply. "You ought to be doing something else. If I find you here when I visit town next, I shall look on you as a d—d fool. Don't forget what I say."

I did not. On the contrary, his curt speech made a profound impression on me. He was thirty, and a man of the world; I was scarcely twenty-three. My self-esteem, always vigorous, was flattered into all sorts of new developments. I gradually perceived that, quite without intending it, I had acquired a reputation. As what? Well, as a learned youth not lacking in brilliance. And this reputation had, I am convinced, sprung solely from the habit of buying books printed mainly in languages which neither myself nor my acquaintances could read. I owned hundreds of books, but I seldom read any of them, except the bibliographical manuals; I had no leisure to read. I scanned. I can only remember, in this period, that I really studied one book—Plato's "Republic," which I read because I thought I was doing the correct thing. Beyond this, and a working knowledge of French, and an entirely sterile apparatus of bibliographical technique, I had mastered nothing. Three qualities I did possess, and on these three qualities I have traded ever since. First, an omnivorous and tenacious memory (now, alas, effete!)—the kind of memory that remembers how much Lon-

don spends per day in cab fares just as easily as the order of Shakespeare's plays or the stock anecdotes of Shelley and Byron. Second, a naturally sound taste in literature. And third, the invaluable, despicable, disingenuous journalistic faculty of seeming to know much more than one does know. None knew better than I that, in any exact, scholarly sense, I knew nothing of literature. Nevertheless, I should have been singularly blind not to see that I knew far more about literature than nine-tenths of the people around me. These people pronounced me an authority, and I speedily accepted myself as an authority: were not my shelves a silent demonstration? By insensible degrees I began to assume the pose of an authority. I have carried that pose into newspaper offices and the very arcana of literary culture, and never yet met with a disaster. Yet in the whole of my life I have not devoted one day to the systematic study of literature. In truth, it is absurdly easy to impress even persons who in the customary meaning of the term have the right to call themselves well-educated. I remember feeling very shy one night in a drawing-room rather new to me. My

host had just returned from Venice, and was describing the palace where Browning lived; but he could not remember the name of it.

"Rezzonico," I said at once, and I chanced to intercept the look of astonishment that passed between host and hostess.

I frequented that drawing-room a great deal afterwards, and was always expected to speak *ex cathedra* on English literature.

London the entity was at least as good as my dreams of it, but the general mass of the persons composing it, considered individually, were a sad disappointment. "What duffers!" I said to myself again and again. "What duffers!" I had come prepared to sit provincially at the feet of these Londoners! I was humble enough when I arrived, but they soon cured me of that—they were so ready to be impressed! What struck me was the extraordinary rarity of the men who really could "do their job." And when I found them, they were invariably provincials like me who had come up with the same illusions and suffered the same enlightenment. All who were successfully performing that feat known as "getting on" were provincials. I enrolled myself in their ranks. I said that I would get on. The

"d—d fool" phrase of the Chancery clerk rang in my ears like a bugle to march.

And for about a year I didn't move a step. I read more than I have ever read before or since. But I did nothing. I made no effort, nor did I subject myself to any mental discipline. I simply gorged on English and French literature for the amusement I could extract from such gluttony, and found physical exercise in becoming the champion of an excessively suburban lawn-tennis club. I wasted a year in contemplating the magnificence of my future doings. Happily I never spoke these dreams aloud! They were only the private solace of my idleness. Now it was that I at last decided upon the vocation of letters; not scholarship, not the dilettantism of belles-lettres, but sheer constructive journalism and possibly fiction. London, however, is chiefly populated by grey-haired men who for twenty years have been about to become journalists and authors. And but for a fortunate incident—the thumb of my Fate has always been turned up—I might ere this have fallen back into that tragic rearguard of Irresolutes.

Through the good offices of my appreciative friends who had forgotten the name of the Palaz-

zo Rezzonico, I was enabled to take up my quarters in the abode of some artists at Chelsea. I began to revolve, dazzled, in a circle of painters and musicians who, without the least affectation, spelt Art with the majuscule; indeed, it never occurred to them that people existed who would spell it otherwise. I was compelled to set to work on the reconstruction of nearly all my ideals. I had lived in a world where beauty was not mentioned, seldom thought of. I believe I had scarcely heard the adjective "beautiful" applied to anything whatever, save confections like Gounod's "There is a green hill far away." Modern oak sideboards were called handsome, and Christmas cards were called pretty; and that was about all. But now I found myself among souls that talked of beauty openly and unashamed. On the day that I arrived at the house in Chelsea, the drawing-room had just been papered, and the pattern of the frieze resembled nothing in my experience. I looked at it.

"Don't you think our frieze is charming?" the artist said, his eyes glistening.

It was the man's obvious sincerity that astounded me. O muse of mahogany and green rep! Here was a creature who took a serious

interest in the pattern of his wall-papers! I expressed my enthusiasm for the frieze.

"Yes," he replied, with simple solemnity, "*it is very beautiful.*"

This worship of beauty was continuous. The very teaspoons were banned or blessed on their curves, and as for my rare editions, they wilted under tests to which they were wholly unaccustomed. I possessed a *rarissime* illustrated copy of Manon Lescaut, of which I was very proud, and I showed it with pride to the artist. He remarked that it was one of the ugliest books he had ever seen.

"But," I cried, "you've no idea how scarce it is! It's worth—"

He laughed.

I perceived that I must begin life again, and I began it again, sustained in my first efforts by the all-pervading atmosphere of ardour. My new intimates were not only keenly appreciative of beauty, they were bent on creating it. They dreamed of great art-works, lovely compositions, impassioned song. Music and painting they were familiar with, and from me they were serenely sure of literature. The glorious accent with which they clothed that word—literature!

Aware beforehand of my authority, my enthusiasm, they accepted me with quick, warm sympathy as a fellow-idealist. Then they desired to know what I was engaged upon, what my aims were, and other facts exceedingly difficult to furnish.

It happened that the most popular of all popular weeklies had recently given a prize of a thousand pounds for a sensational serial. When the serial had run its course, the editor offered another prize of twenty guineas for the best humorous condensation of it in two thousand words. I thought I might try for that, but I feared that my friends would not consider it "art." I was mistaken. They pointed out that caricature was a perfectly legitimate form of art, often leading to much original beauty, and they urged me to enter the lists. They read the novel in order the better to enjoy the caricature of it, and when, after six evenings' labour, my work was done, they fiercely exulted in it. Out of the fulness of technical ignorance they predicted with certainty that I should win the prize.

Here again life plagiarized the sentimental novel, for I did win the guineas. My friends were delighted, but they declined to admit a

particle of surprise. Their belief in what I could do kept me awake at nights.

This was my first pen-money, earned within two months of my change of air. I felt that the omen was favourable.

V

NOW I come to the humiliating part of my literary career, the period of what in Fleet Street is called "free-lancing." I use the term "humiliating" deliberately. A false aureole of romance encircles the head of that miserable opportunist, the free-lance. I remember I tried to feel what a glorious thing it was to be a free-lance, dependent on none (but dependent on all), relying always on one's own invention and ingenuity, poised always to seize the psychological moment, and gambling for success with the calm (so spurious) of a dicer in the eighteenth century. Sometimes I deceived myself into complacency, but far more often I realized the true nature of the enterprise and set my teeth to endure the spiritual shame of it. The free-lance is a tramp touting for odd jobs; a pedlar crying stuff which is bought usually in default of better; a producer endeavouring to supply a market of whose conditions he is in ignorance more or less complete; a commercial

traveller liable constantly to the insolence of an elegant West End draper's "buyer." His attitude is in essence a fawning attitude; it must be so; he is the poor relation, the doff-hat, the ready-for-anything. He picks up the crumbs that fall from the table of the "staff"—the salaried, jealous, intriguing staff—or he sits down, honoured, when the staff has finished. He never goes to bed; he dares not; if he did, a crumb would fall. His experience is as degrading as a competitive examination, and only less degrading than that of the black-and-white artist who trudges Fleet Street with a portfolio under his arm. And the shame of the free-lance is none the less real because he alone witnesses it—he and the postman, that postman with elongated missive, that herald of ignominy, that dismaying process-server, who raps the rap of apprehension and probable doom six, eight, and even twelve times per diem!

The popular paper that had paid me twenty guineas for being facetious expressed a polite willingness to consider my articles, and I began to turn the life of a law-office into literature; my provincial experience had taught me the trick. Here was I engaged all day in drawing

up bills of costs that would impose on a taxing-master to the very last three-and-fourpence; and there was the public in whose chaotic mind a lawyer's bill existed as a sort of legend, hieroglyphic and undecipherable. What more natural than a brief article—"How a bill of costs is drawn up," a trifling essay of three hundred words over which I laboured for a couple of evenings? It was accepted, printed, and with a postal order for ten shillings on the ensuing Thursday I saw the world opening before me like a flower. The pathos of my sanguine ignorance! I followed up this startling success with a careful imitation of it—"How a case is prepared for trial," and that too brought its ten shillings. But the vein suddenly ceased. My fledgling fancy could do no more with law, and I cast about in futile blindness for other subjects. I grew conscious for the first time of my lack of technical skill. My facility seemed to leave me, and my self-confidence. Every night I laboured dully and obstinately, excogitating, inventing, grinding out, bent always to the squalid and bizarre tastes of the million, and ever striving after "catchiness" and "actuality." My soul, in the arrogance of a certain achievement, glances

back furtively, with loathing, at that period of emotional and intellectual dishonour. The one bright aspect of it is that I wrote everything with a nice regard for English; I would lavish a night on a few paragraphs; and years of this penal servitude left me with a dexterity in the handling of sentences that still surprises the possessor of it. I have heard of Fleet Street hacks who regularly produce sixty thousand words a week; but I well know that there are not many men who can come fresh to a pile of new books, tear the entrails out of them, and write a fifteen-hundred-word *causerie* on them, passably stylistic, all inside sixty minutes. This means skill, and I am proud of it. But my confessions as a reviewer will come later.

No! Free-lancing was not precisely a triumph for me. Call it my purgatorio. I shone sometimes with a feeble flicker, in half-crown paragraphs, and in jumpy articles under alliterative titles that now and then flared on a pink or yellow contents-bill. But I can state with some certainty that my earnings in the mass did not exceed threepence an hour. During all this time I was continually spurred by the artists around

me, who naïvely believed in me, and who were cognizant only of my successes. I never spoke of defeat; I used to retire to my room with rejected stuff as impassive as a wounded Indian; while opening envelopes at breakfast I had the most perfect command of my features. Mere vanity always did and always will prevent me from acknowledging a reverse at the moment; not till I have retrieved my position can I refer to a discomfiture. Consequently, my small world regarded me as much more successful than I really was. Had I to live again, which Apollo forbid, I would pursue the same policy.

During all this time, too, I was absorbing French fiction incessantly; in French fiction I include the work of Turgenev, because I read him always in French translations. Turgenev, the brothers de Goncourt, and de Maupassant were my gods. I accepted their canons, and they filled me with a general scorn of English fiction which I have never quite lost. From the composition of 'bits' articles I turned to admire "Fathers and Children" or "Une Vie," and the violence of the contrast never struck me at the time. I did not

regard myself as an artist, or as emotional by temperament. My ambition was to be a journalist merely—cool, smart, ingenious, equal to every emergency. I prided myself on my impassivity. I was acquainted with men who wept at fine music—I felt sure that Saint Cecilia and the heavenly choir could not draw a single tear from *my* journalistic eye. I failed to perceive that my appreciation of French fiction, and the harangues on fiction which I delivered to my intimates, were essentially emotional in character, and I forgot that the sight of a successful dramatist before the curtain on a first-night always caused me to shake with a mysterious and profound agitation. I mention these facts to show how I misunderstood, or ignored, the progress of my spiritual development. A crisis was at hand. I suffered from insomnia and other intellectual complaints, and went to consult a physician who was also a friend.

"You know," he said, in the course of talk, "you are one of the most highly-strung men I have ever met."

When I had recovered from my stupefaction, I glowed with pride. What a fine thing to be highly-strung, nervously organized! I saw my-

self in a new light; I thought better of myself; I rather looked down on cool, ingenious journalists. Perhaps I dimly suspected that Fleet Street was not to be the end of all things for me. It was soon afterwards that the artists whom I had twitted about their temperament accused me of sharing it with them to the full. Another surprise! I was in a state of ferment then. But I had acquired such a momentum in the composition of articles destined to rejection that I continued throughout this crisis to produce them with a regularity almost stupid. My friends began to inquire into the nature of my ultimate purpose. They spoke of a large work, and I replied that I had no spare time. None could question my industry. "Why don't you write a novel on Sundays?" one of them suggested.

The idea was grandiose. To conceive such an idea was a proof of imagination. And the air with which these enthusiasts said these things was entirely splendid and magnificent. But I was just then firmly convinced that I had no vocation for the novel; I had no trace of a desire to emulate Turgenev. Again and again my fine enthusiasts returned to the charge, urged on by

I know not what instinct. At last, to please them, to quieten them, I promised to try to write a short story. Without too much difficulty I concocted one concerning an artist's model, and sent it to a weekly which gives a guinea each week for a prize story. My tale won the guinea.

"There! We told you so!" was the chorus. And I stood convicted of underestimating my own powers; fault rare enough in my career!

However, I insisted that the story was despicably bad, a commercial product, and the reply was that I ought next to write one for art's sake. Instead, I wrote one for morality's sake. It was a story with a lofty purpose, dealing with the tragedy of a courtesan's life. (No, I had not then read "Splendeurs et Miséres des Courtisanes.") A prominent philanthropist with a tendency to faddism, who for morality's sake was running a monthly magazine, was much impressed by my tale, and after some trouble—the contributors were supposed to contribute *con amore*—I got another guinea. This story only pleased me for a few weeks; its crudity was too glaring. But I continued to write short stories, and several of them appeared in halfpenny even-

ing papers. Gaining in skill, I aimed political skits in narrative form at the more exclusive, the consciously superior, penny evening papers, and one or two of these hit the mark. I admired the stuff greatly. Lo, I had risen from a concocter of 'bits' articles to be the scorpion-sting of cabinet ministers! My self-confidence began to return.

Then, one day, one beneficent and adorable day, my brain was visited by a Plot. I had a prevision that I was about to write a truly excellent short story. I took incredible pains to be realistic, stylistic, and all the other *istics*, and the result amazed me. I knew that at last I had accomplished a good thing—I knew by the glow within me, the emotional fatigue, the vista of sweet labour behind me. What moved me to despatch this jewel, this bit of caviare-to-the-general, to the editor of a popular weekly with a circulation of a quarter of a million, I cannot explain. But so I did. The editor returned it with a note to say that he liked the plot, but the style was below his standard. I laughed, and, more happily inspired, sent it to the Yellow Book, where it duly appeared. The Yellow Book was then in apogee. Several

fiercely literary papers singled out my beautiful story for especial praise.

"By heaven!" I said, "I will write a novel." It was a tremendous resolution.

I saw that I could *write*.

VI

BUT before continuing the narration of my adventures in fiction, I must proceed a little further in the dusty tracks of journalism. When I had laboured sordidly and for the most part ineffectively as a free-lance for two or three years, I became, with surprising suddenness, the assistant-editor of a ladies' paper. The cause of this splendid metamorphosis was sadly unromantic. I had not bombarded the paper, from the shelter of a pseudonym, with articles of unexampled brilliance. The editor had not invited his mysterious and talented contributor into the editorial sanctum, and there informed him that his exclusive services, at a generous salary, were deemed absolutely essential to the future welfare of the organ which he had hitherto assisted only on occasion. I had never written a line for the paper, nor for any ladies' paper. I obtained the situation by "influence," and that of the grossest kind. All that I personally did

was to furnish a list of the newspapers and periodicals to which I had contributed, and some specimens of my printed work. These specimens proved rather more than satisfactory. The editor adored smartness; smartness was the "note" of his paper; and he discovered several varieties of smartness in my productions. At our first interview, and always afterwards, his attitude towards me was full of appreciation and kindness. The post was a good one, a hundred and fifty a year for one whole day and four half-days a week. Yet I was afraid to take it. I was afraid to exchange two hundred a year for a hundred and fifty and half my time, I who ardently wished to be a journalist and to have leisure for the imitation of our lady George Sand! In the end I was hustled into the situation. My cowardice was shameful; but in recording it I am not unconscious of the fact that truth makes for piquancy.

"I am sorry to say that I shall have to leave you at Christmas, sir."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the lawyer who admired Browning. "How is that?"

"I am going on to the staff of a paper."

Perhaps I have never felt prouder than when

I uttered those words. My pride must have been disgusting. This was the last time I ever said "sir" to any man under the rank of a knight. The defection of a reliable clerk who combined cunning in the preparation of costs with a hundred and thirty words a minute at shorthand was decidedly a blow to my excellent employer; good costs clerks are rarer than true poets; but he suffered it with impassive stoicism; I liked him for that.

On a New Year's Day I strolled along Piccadilly to the first day's work on my paper. "My paper"—O the joyful sound! But the boats were burnt up; their ashes were even cool; and my mind, in the midst of all this bliss, was vexed by grave apprehensions. Suppose the paper to expire, as papers often did! I knew that the existence of this particular paper was precarious; its foundations were not fixed in the dark backward and abysm of time—it was two years old. Nevertheless, and indisputably and solely, I was at last a journalist, and entitled so to describe myself in parish registers, county court summonses, jury papers, and income-tax returns. In six months I might be a tramp sleeping in Trafalgar Square, but on that

gorgeous day I was a journalist; nay, I was second in command over a cohort of women whose cleverness, I trusted, would be surpassed only by their charm.

The office was in the West End—index of smartness; one arrived at ten thirty or so, and ascended to the suite in a lift. One smoked cigars and cigarettes incessantly. There was no discipline, and no need of discipline, since the indoor staff consisted only of the editor, myself, and the editor's lady-secretary. The contrast between this and the exact ritual of a solicitor's office was marked and delightful. In an adjoining suite on the same floor an eminent actress resided, and an eminent actor strolled in to us, grandiosely, during the morning, accepted a cigar and offered a cigarette (according to his frugal custom), chatted grandiosely, and grandiosely departed. Parcels were constantly arriving—books, proofs, process-blocks, samples of soap and of corsets: this continuous procession of parcels impressed me as much as anything. From time to time well-dressed and alert women called, to correct proofs, to submit drawings, or to scatter excuses. This was "Evadne," who wrote about the toilet; that

was "Angélique," who did the cookery; the other was "Enid," the well-known fashion artist. In each case I was of course introduced as the new assistant-editor; they were adorable, without exception. At one o'clock, having apparently done little but talk and smoke, we went out, the Editor and I, to lunch at the Cri.

"This," I said to myself quite privately, "this may be a novel by Balzac, but it is not my notion of journalism."

The doings of the afternoon, however, bore a closer resemblance to my notion of journalism. That day happened to be press-day, and I perceived that we gradually became very busy. Messenger-boys waited while I wrote paragraphs to accompany portraits, or while I regularized the syntax of a recipe for sole *à la Normande*, or while I ornamented two naked lines from the "Morning Post" with four lines of embroidery. The editor was enchanted with my social paragraphs; he said I was born to it, and perhaps I was. I innocently asked in what part of the paper they were to shine.

"Gwendolen's column," he replied.

"Who is Gwendolen?" I demanded. Weeks before, I had admired Gwendolen's breadth of

view and worldly grasp of things, qualities rare in a woman.

"You are," he said, "and I am. It's only an office signature."

Now, that was what I called journalism. I had been taken in, but I was glad to have been taken in.

At four o'clock he began frantically to dictate the weekly London Letter which he contributed to an Indian newspaper; the copy caught the Indian mail at six. And this too was what I called journalism. I felt myself to be in my element; I lived. At an hour which I forget we departed together to the printers, and finished off. It was late when the paper "went down." The next morning the lady-secretary handed to me the first rough folded "pull" of the issue, and I gazed at it as a mother might gaze at her firstborn.

"But is this all?" ran my thoughts. The fact was, I had expected some process of initiation. I had looked on "journalism" as a sort of temple of mysteries into which, duly impressed, I should be ceremoniously guided. I was called assistant-editor for the sake of grandiloquence, but of course I knew I was chiefly a mere sub-

editor, and I had anticipated that the sub-editorial craft would be a complex technical business requiring long study and practice. On the contrary, there seemed to me to be almost nothing in its technique. The tricks of making-up, making-ready, measuring blocks, running-round, cutting, saving a line, and so on: my chief assumed in the main that I understood all these, and I certainly did grasp them instinctively; they appeared childishly simple. Years afterwards, a contributor confided to me that the editor had told her that he taught me nothing after the first day, and that I was a born journalist. I do not seriously think that I was a born journalist, and I mention this detail, not from any vain-glory over a trifle, but to show that the *arcana* of journalism partake of the nature of an imposture. The same may be said of all professional *arcana*, even those of politics or of the swell-mob.

In a word, I was a journalist—but I felt just the same as before.

I vaguely indicated my feelings on this point to the chief.

"Ah!" he said. "But you know you'd been through the mill before you came here."

So I had been through the mill! Writing articles at night and getting them back the next morning but one, for a year or two—that was going through the mill! Let it be so, then. When other men envied my position, and expressed their opinion that I had "got on to a soft thing," I indicated that the present was the fruit of the past, and that I had been through the mill.

Journalism for women, by women under the direction of men, is an affair at once anxious, agreeable and delicate for the men who direct. It is a journalism by itself, apart from other journalisms. And it is the only journalism that I intimately know. The commercial side of it, the queer financial basis of it, have a peculiar interest, but my scheme does not by any means include the withdrawal of those curtains. I am concerned with letters, and letters, I fear, have little connection with women's journalism. I learnt nothing of letters in that office, save a few of the more obvious journalistic devices, but I learnt a good deal about frocks, household management, and the secret nature of women, especially the secret nature of women. As for frocks, I have sincerely tried to forget that

branch of human knowledge; nevertheless the habit, acquired then, of glancing first at a woman's skirt and her shoes, has never left me. My apprenticeship to frocks was studded with embarrassing situations, of which I will mention only one. It turns upon some designs for a layette. A layette, perhaps I ought to explain, is an outfit for a new-born babe, and naturally it is prepared in advance of the stranger's arrival. Underneath a page of layette illustrations I once put the legend, correct in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand—but this was the thousandth—*Cut-to-measure patterns supplied.* The solecism stands to all eternity against me on the file of the paper; and the recollection of it, like the recollection of a *gaucherie,* is persistently haunting.

And here I shall quit for a time the feminine atmosphere, and the path which I began by calling dusty, but which is better called flowery. My activity in that path showed no further development until after I had written my first novel.

VII

"BY heaven!" I said, "I will write a novel!"

And I sat down to my oaken bureau with the air of a man who has resolved to commit a stupendous crime. Perhaps indeed it was a crime, this my first serious challenge to a neglectful and careless world. At any rate it was meant to be the beginning of the end, the end being twofold—fame and a thousand a year. You must bear well in mind that I was by no means the ordinary person, and my novel was by no means to be the ordinary novel. In these cases the very essence of the situation is always that one is not ordinary. I had just discovered that I could write—and when I use the term "write" here, I use it in a special sense, to be appreciated only by those elect who can themselves "write," and difficult of comprehension by all others. I had had a *conte*—exquisitely Gallic as to spirit and form—in the "Yellow Book," and that *conte* had been lauded

in the "South Audley Street Gazette" or some organ of destructive criticism. My friends believed in Art, themselves, and me. I believed in myself, Art, and them. Could any factor be lacking to render the scene sublime and historic?

So I sat down to write my first novel, under the sweet influences of the de Goncourts, Turgenev, Flaubert, and de Maupassant. It was to be entirely unlike all English novels except those of one author, whose name I shall not mention now, for the reason that I have aforetime made my admiration of that author very public. I clearly remember that the purpose uppermost in my mind was to imitate what I may call the physical characteristics of French novels. There were to be no poetical quotations in my novel, no titles to the chapters; the narrative was to be divided irregularly into sections by Roman numerals only; and it was indispensable that a certain proportion of these sections should begin or end abruptly. As thus, for a beginning:—"Gerald suddenly changed the conversation, and taking the final match from his match-box at last agreed to light a cigar." And for an ending:—"Her tremulous eyes sought his; breathing a sigh she murmured

. . . " O succession of dots, charged with significance vague but tremendous, there were to be hundreds of you in my novel, because you play so important a part in the literature of the country of Victor Hugo and M. Loubet! So much for the physical characteristics. To come nearer to the soul of it, my novel was to be a mosaic consisting exclusively of Flaubert's *mots justes*—it was to be *mots justes* composed into the famous *ecriture artiste* of the de Goncourts. The sentences were to perform the trick of " the rise and fall." The adjectives were to have colour, the verbs were to have colour, and perhaps it was a *sine qua non* that even the pronouns should be prismatic—I forget. And all these effects were to be obtained without the most trifling sacrifice of truth. There was to be no bowing in the house of the Rimmon of sentimentality. Life being grey, sinister, and melancholy, my novel must be grey, sinister, and melancholy. As a matter of strict fact, life deserved none of these epithets; I was having a very good time; but at twenty-seven one is captious, and liable to err in judgment —a liability which fortunately disappears at

thirty-five or so. No startling events were to occur in my novel, nor anything out of the way that might bring the blush of shame to the modesty of nature; no ingenious combinations, no dramatic surprises, and above all no coincidences. It was to be the Usual miraculously transformed by Art into the Sublime.

The sole liberty that I might permit myself in handling the Usual was to give it a rhythmic contour—a precious distinction in those Yellerbocky days.

All these cardinal points being settled, I passed to the business of choosing a subject. Need I say that I chose myself? But, in obedience to my philosophy, I made myself a failure. I regarded my hero with an air of "There, but for the grace of God, goes me!" I decided that he should go through most of my own experiences, but that instead of fame and a thousand a year he should arrive ultimately at disillusion and a desolating suburban domesticity. I said I would call my novel "In the Shadow," a title suggested to me by the motto of Balzac's "Country Doctor"—"For a wounded heart, shadow and silence." It was to be all very

dolorous, this Odyssey of a London clerk who —— But I must not disclose any detail of the plot.

So I sat down, and wrote on a fair quarto sheet, "In the Shadow," and under that, "I." It was a religious rite, an august and imposing ceremonial; and I was the officiating priest. In the few fleeting instants between the tracing of the "I" and the tracing of the first word of the narrative, I felt happy and proud; but immediately the fundamental brain-work began, I lost nearly all my confidence. With every stroke the illusion grew thinner, more remote. I perceived that I could not become Flaubert by taking thought, and this rather obvious truth rushed over me as a surprise. I knew what I wanted to do, and I could not do it. I felt, but I could not express. My sentences would persist in being damnably Mudiesque. The *mots justes* hid themselves exasperatingly behind a cloud. The successions of dots looked merely fatuous. The charm, the poetry, the distinction, the inevitableness, the originality, the force, and the invaluable rhythmic contour—these were anywhere save on my page. All writers are familiar with the dreadful despair that

ensues when a composition, on perusal, obstinately presents itself as a series of little systems of words joined by conjunctions and so forth, something like this—subject, predicate, object, *but*, subject, predicate, object. Pronoun, *however*, predicate, negative, infinitive verb. *Nevertheless*, participle, accusative, subject, predicate, etc., etc., etc., for evermore. I suffered that despair. The proper remedy is to go to the nearest bar and have a drink, or to read a bit of "Comus" or "Urn-Burial," but at that time I had no skill in weathering anti-cyclones, and I drove forward like a sinking steamer in a heavy sea.

And this was what it was, in serious earnest, to be an author! For I reckon that in writing the first chapter of my naturalistic novel, I formally became an author; I had undergone a certain apprenticeship. I didn't feel like an author, no more than I had felt like a journalist on a similar occasion. Indeed, far less: I felt like a fool, an incompetent ass. I seemed to have an idea that there was no such thing as literature, that literature was a mirage, or an effect of hypnotism, or a concerted fraud. After all, I thought, what in the name of common sense

is the use of telling this silly ordinary story of everyday life? Where is the point? What *is* art, anyway, and all this chatter about truth to life, and all this rigmarole of canons?

I finished the chapter that night, hurriedly, perfunctorily, and only because I had sworn to finish it. Then, in obedience to an instinct which all Grub Street has felt, I picked out the correct "Yellow Book" from a shelf and read my beautiful story again. That enheartened me a little, restored my faith in the existence of art, and suggested the comfortable belief that things were not perhaps as bad as they seemed.

"Well, how's the novel getting on?" my friend the wall-paper enthusiast inquired jovially at supper.

"Oh, fine!" I said. "It's going to be immense."

Why one should utter these frightful and senseless lies, I cannot guess. I might just as well have spoken the precise truth to him, for his was a soul designed by providence for the encouragement of others. Still, having made that remark, I added in my private ear that either the novel must be immense or I must perish in the attempt to make it so.

In six months I had written only about thirty thousand words, and I felt the sort of elation that probably succeeds six months on a treadmill. But one evening, in the midst of a chapter, a sudden and mysterious satisfaction began to warm my inmost being. I knew that that chapter was good and going to be good. I experienced happiness in the very act of work. Emotion and technique were reconciled. It was as if I had surprisingly come upon the chart with the blood-red cross showing where the Spanish treasure was buried. I dropped my pen, and went out for a walk, and decided to give the book an entirely fresh start. I carefully read through all that I had written. It was bad, but viewed in the mass it produced on me a sort of culminating effect which I had not anticipated. Conceive the poor Usual at the bottom of a flight of stairs, and the region of the Sublime at the top: it seemed to me that I had dragged the haggard thing halfway up, and that it lay there, inert but safe, awaiting my second effort. The next night I braced myself to this second effort, and I thought that I succeeded.

"We're doing the trick, Charlie," Edmund Kean whispered into the ear of his son during a

poignant scene of "Brutus." And in the very crisis of my emotional chapters, while my hero was rushing fatally to the nether greyness of the suburbs and all the world was at its most sinister and most melancholy, I said to myself with glee: "We're doing the trick." My moods have always been a series of violent contrasts, and I was now just as uplifted as I had before been depressed. There were interludes of doubt and difficulty, but on the whole I was charmed with my novel. It would be a despicable affectation to disguise the fact that I deemed it a truly distinguished piece of literature, idiosyncratic, finely imaginative, and of rhythmic contour. As I approached the end, my self-esteem developed in a *crescendo*. I finished the tale, having sentenced my hero to a marriage infallibly disastrous, at three o'clock one morning. I had laboured for twelve hours without intermission. It was great, this spell; it was histrionic. It was Dumas over again, and the roaring French forties.

Nevertheless, to myself I did not yet dare to call myself an artist. I lacked the courage to believe that I had the sacred fire, the inborn

and not-to-be-acquired vision. It seemed impossible that this should be so. I have ridiculed the whole artist tribe, and, in the pursuit of my vocation, I shall doubtless ridicule them again; but never seriously. Nothing is more deeply rooted in me than my reverence for the artistic faculty. And whenever I say, "The man's an artist," I say it with an instinctive solemnity that so far as I am concerned ends all discussion. Dared I utter this great saying to my shaving-mirror? No, I repeat that I dared not. More than a year elapsed before the little incident described at the commencement of these memoirs provided me with the audacity to inform the author of "In the Shadow" that he too belonged to the weird tribe of Benjamin.

When my novel had been typewritten and I read it in cold blood, I was absolutely unable to decide whether it was very good, good, medium, bad, or very bad. I could not criticize it. All I knew was that certain sentences, in the vein of the *ecriture artiste*, persisted beautifully in my mind, like fine lines from a favourite poet. I loosed the brave poor thing into the world over a post-office counter. "What chance *has*

it, in the fray?" I exclaimed. My novel had become nothing but a parcel. Thus it went in search of its fate.

I have described the composition of my first book in detail as realistic as I can make it, partly because a few years ago the leading novelists of the day seemed to enter into a conspiracy to sentimentalize the first-book episode in their brilliant careers.

VIII

"WILL you step this way?" said the publisher's manager, and after coasting by many shelves loaded with scores of copies of the same book laid flat in piles—to an author the most depressing sight in the world—I was ushered into the sanctum, the star-chamber, the den, the web of the spider.

I beheld the publisher, whose name is a household word wherever the English language is written for posterity. Even at that time his imprint flamed on the title-pages of one or two works of a deathless nature. My manuscript lay on an occasional table by his side, and I had the curious illusion that he was posing for his photograph with my manuscript. As I glanced at it I could not help thinking that its presence there bordered on the miraculous. I had parted with it at a post-office. It had been stamped, sorted, chucked into a van, whirled through the perilous traffic of London's centre, chucked out of a van,

sorted again, and delivered with many other similar parcels at the publisher's. The publisher had said: "Send this to So-and-so to read." Then more perils by road and rail, more risks of extinction and disorientation. Then So-and-so, probably a curt man, with a palate cloyed by the sickliness of many manuscripts, and a short way with new authors, had read it or pretended to read it. Then finally the third ordeal of locomotion. And there it was, I saw it once more, safe!

We discussed the weather and new reputations. I was nervous, and I think the publisher was nervous, too. At length, in a manner mysterious and inexplicable, the talk shifted to my manuscript. The publisher permitted himself a few compliments of the guarded sort.

"But there's no money in it, you know," he said.

"I suppose not," I assented. ("You are an ass for assenting to that," I said to myself.)

"I invariably lose money over new authors," he remarked, as if I was to blame.

"You didn't lose much over Mrs. ——," I replied, naming one of his notorious successes.

"Oh, *well!*" he said, "of *course*——. But I didn't make so much as you think, perhaps. Publishing is a very funny business." And then he added: "Do you think your novel will succeed like Mrs. ——'s?"

I said that I hoped it would.

"I'll be perfectly frank with you," the publisher exclaimed, smiling beneficently. "My reader likes your book. I'll tell you what he says." He took a sheet of paper that lay on the top of the manuscript and read.

I was enchanted, spell-bound. The nameless literary adviser used phrases of which the following are specimens (I am recording with exactitude): "Written with great knowledge and a good deal of insight." "Character delineated by a succession of rare and subtle touches." "Living, convincing." "Vigour and accuracy." "The style is good."

I had no idea that publishers' readers were capable of such laudation.

The publisher read on: "I do not think it likely to be a striking success!"

"Oh!" I murmured, shocked by this bluntness.

"There's no money in it," the publisher repeated, firmly. "First books are too risky. . . . I should like to publish it."

"Well?" I said, and paused. I felt that he had withdrawn within himself in order to ponder upon the chances of this terrible risk. So as not to incommode him with my gaze, I examined the office, which resembled a small drawing-room rather than an office. I saw around me signed portraits of all the roaring lions on the sunny side of Grub Street.

"I'll publish it," said the publisher, and I believe he made an honest attempt not to look like a philanthropist; however, the attempt failed. "I'll publish it. But of course I can only give you a small royalty."

"What royalty?" I asked.

"Five per cent.—on a three-and-six-penny book."

"Very well. Thank you!" I said.

"I'll give you fifteen per cent. after the sale of five thousand copies," he added kindly.

O ironist!

I emerged from the web of the spider triumphant, an accepted author. Exactly ten days had elapsed since I had first parted with my

manuscript. Once again life was plagiarizing fiction. I could not believe that this thing was true. I simply could not believe it. "Oh!" I reflected, incredulous, "Something's bound to happen. It can't really come off. The publisher might die, and then——"

Protected by heaven on account of his good deeds, the publisher felicitously survived; and after a delay of twelve months (twelve centuries—during which I imagined that the universe hung motionless and expectant in the void!) he accomplished his destiny by really and truly publishing my book.

The impossible had occurred. I was no longer a mere journalist; I was an author.

"After all, it's nothing!" I said, with that intense and unoriginal humanity which distinguishes all of us. And in a blinding flash I saw that an author was in essence the same thing as a grocer or a duke.

IX

MY novel, under a new title, was published both in England and America. I actually collected forty-one reviews, of it, and there must have been many that escaped me. Of these forty-one, four were unfavourable, eleven mingled praise and blame in about equal proportions, and twenty-six were unmistakably favourable, a few of them being enthusiastic.

Yet I had practically no friends on the press. One friend I had, a man of power, and he reviewed my book with an appreciation far too kind; but his article came as a complete surprise to me. Another friend I had, sub-editor of a society weekly, and he asked me for a copy of my book so that he might "look after it" in the paper. Here is part of the result:

"He has all the young novelist's faults. . . . These are glaring faults; for, given lack of interest, and unpleasant scenes, how can a book be expected to be popular?"

A third friend I had, who knew the chief fiction-reviewer on a great morning paper. He asked me for a special copy of my book, and quite on his own initiative, undertook to arrange the affair. Here is part of the result:

"There is not much to be said either for or against —— by Mr. ——"

I had no other friends on the press, or friends who had friends on the press.

I might easily butcher the reviews for your amusement, but this practice is becoming trite. I will quote a single sentence which pleased me as much as any:—"What our hero's fate was let those who care to know find out, but let us assure them that in its discovery they will read of London life and labour as it is, not as the bulk of romances paint it." All the principal organs were surprisingly appreciative. And the majority of the reviewers agreed that my knowledge of human nature was exceptionally good, that my style was exceptionally good, that I had in me the makings of a novelist, and that my present subject was weak. My subject was not weak; but let that pass. When I reflect how my book flouted the accepted canons of English fiction, and how many aspects of it must have annoyed

nine reviewers out of ten, I am compelled to the conclusion that reviewers are a very good-natured class of persons. I shall return to this interesting point later—after I have described how I became a reviewer myself. The fact to be asserted is that I, quite obscure and defenceless, was treated very well. I could afford to smile from a high latitude at the remark of "The New York ——" that "the story and characters are commonplace in the extreme." I felt that I had not lived in vain, and that kindred spirits were abroad in the land.

My profits from this book with the exceptional style and the exceptional knowledge of human nature, exceeded the cost of having it typewritten by the sum of one sovereign. Nor was I, nor am I, disposed to grumble at this. Many a first book has cost its author a hundred pounds. I got a new hat out of mine.

What I did grumble at was the dishonour of the prophet in his own county. Here I must delicately recall that my novel was naturalistic, and that it described the career of a young man alone in London. It had no "realism" in the vulgar sense, as several critics admitted, but still it was desperately exact in places, and I never sur-

rounded the head of a spade with the aureole of a sentimental implement. The organ of a great seaport remarked: "We do not consider the book a healthy one. We say no more." Now you must imagine this excessively modern novel put before a set of estimable people whose ideas on fiction had been formed under the influence of Dickens and Mrs. Henry Wood, and who had never changed those ideas. Some of them, perhaps, had not read a novel for ten years before they read mine. The result was appalling, frightful, tragical. For months I hesitated to visit the town which had the foresight to bear me, and which is going to be famous on that score. I was castigated in the local paper. My nearest and dearest played nervously with their bread when my novel was mentioned at dinner. A relative in a distant continent troubled himself to inform me that the book was fragmentary and absolutely worthless. The broader-minded merely wished that I had never written the book. The discreet received it in silence. One innocent person, for whom I have the warmest regard, thought that my novel might be a suitable birthday present for his adolescent son. By chance he perused the book himself on the birthday eve. I was told

that neither on that night nor on the next did he get a wink of sleep. His adolescent son certainly never got my book.

Most authors, I have learnt on enquiry, have to suffer from this strange lack of appreciation in the very circle where appreciation should be kindest; if one fault isn't found, another is; but they draw a veil across that dark aspect of the bright auctorial career. I, however, am trying to do without veils, and hence I refer to the matter.

X

MY chief resigned his position on the paper with intent to enliven other spheres of activity. The news of his resignation was a blow to me. It often happens that when an editor walks out of an office in the exercise of free-will, the staff follows him under compulsion. In Fleet Street there is no security of tenure unless one is ingenious enough to be the proprietor of one's paper.

"I shall never get on with any one as I have got on with you," I said to the chief.

"You needn't," he answered. "I'm sure they'll have the sense to give you my place if you ask for it." "They" were a board of directors.

And they had the sense; they even had the sense not to wait until I asked. I have before remarked that the thumb of my Fate has always been turned up. Still on the glorious side of thirty, still young, enthusiastic, and a prey to delightful illusions, I suddenly found myself the editor of a London weekly paper. It was not

a leading organ, but it was a London weekly paper, and it had pretensions; at least I had. My name was inscribed in various annuals of reference. I dined as an editor with other editors. I remember one day sitting down to table in a populous haunt of journalists with no less than four editors. "Three years ago," I said to myself, "I should have deemed this an impossible fairy tale." I know now that there are hundreds of persons in London and elsewhere who regard even editors with gentle and condescending toleration. One learns.

I needed a sub-editor, and my first act was to acquire one. I had the whole world of struggling lady-journalists to select from: to choose was an almost sublime function. For some months previously we had been receiving paragraphs and articles from an outside contributor whose *flair* in the discovery of subjects, whose direct simplicity of style and general tidiness of "copy," had always impressed me. I had never seen her, and I knew nothing about her; but I decided that, if she pleased, this lady should be my sub-editor. I wrote desiring her to call, and she called. Without much preface I offered her the situation; she accepted it.

"Who recommended me to you?" she asked.

"No one," I replied, in the rôle of Joseph Pulitzer; "I liked your stuff."

It was a romantic scene. I mention it because I derived a child-like enjoyment from that morning. Vanity was mixed up in it; but I argued—If you are an editor, be an editor imaginatively. I seemed to resemble Louis the Fifteenth beginning to reign after the death of the Regent, but with no troublesome Fleury in the background.

"Now," I cried, "up goes the circulation!"

But circulations are not to be bullied into ascension. They will only rise on the pinions of a carefully constructed policy. I thought I knew all about journalism for women, and I found that I knew scarcely the fringe of it. A man may be a sub-editor, or even an assistant-editor, for half a lifetime, and yet remain ignorant of the true significance of journalism. Those first months were months of experience in a very poignant sense. The proprietary desired certain modifications in the existing policy. O that mysterious "policy," which has to be created and built up out of articles, paragraphs, and pictures! That thrice-mysterious "public taste" which has

to be aimed at in the dark and hit! I soon learnt the difference between legislature and executive. I could "execute" anything, from a eulogy of a philanthropic duchess to a Paris fashion letter. I could instruct a fashion-artist as though I knew what I was talking about. I could play Blucher at the Waterloo of the advertisement-manager. I could interview a beauty and make her say the things that a beauty must say in an interview. But to devise the contents of an issue, to plan them, to balance them; to sail with this wind and tack against that; to keep a sensitive cool finger on the faintly beating pulse of the terrible many-headed patron; to walk in a straight line through a forest black as midnight; to guess the riddle of the circulation-book week by week; to know by instinct why Smiths sent in a repeat-order, or why Simpkins' was ten quires less; to keep one eye on the majestic march of the world, and the other on the vagaries of a bazaar-reporter who has forgotten the law of libel: these things, and seventy-seven others, are the real journalism. It is these things that make editors sardonic, grey, unapproachable.

Unique among all suspenses is the suspense that occupies the editorial mind between the mo-

ment of finally going to press and the moment of examining the issue on the morning of publication. Errors, appalling and disastrous errors, will creep in; and they are irremediable then. These mishaps occur to the most exalted papers, to all papers, except perhaps the "Voce della Verita," which, being the organ of the Pope, is presumably infallible. Tales circulate in Fleet Street that make the hair stand on end; and every editor says: "This might have happened to *me.*" Subtle beyond all subtleties is the magic and sinister change that happens to your issue in the machine-room at the printers. You pass the final page and all seems fair, attractive, clever, well-designed. . . . Ah! But what you see is not what is on the paper; it is the reflection of the bright image in your mind of what you intended! When the last thousand is printed and the parcels are in the vans, then you gaze at the unalterable thing, and you see it coldly as it actually is. You see not what you intended, but what you have accomplished. And the difference! It is like the chill, steely dawn after the vague poetry of a moonlit night.

There is no peace for an editor. He may act the farce of taking a holiday, but the worm of

apprehension is always gnawing at the root of pleasure. I once put my organ to bed and went off by a late train in a perfect delirium of joyous anticipation of my holiday. I was recalled by a telegram that a fire with a strong sense of ironic humour had burnt the printing office to the ground and destroyed five-sixths of my entire issue. In such crises something has to be done, and done quickly. You cannot say to your public next week: "Kindly excuse the absence of the last number, as there was a fire at the printers." Your public recks not of fires, no more than the General Post Office, in its attitude towards late clerks, recognizes the existence of fogs in winter. And herein lies, for the true journalist, one of the principal charms of Fleet Street. Herein lies the reason why an editor's life is at once insufferable and worth living. There are no excuses. Every one knows that if the crater of Highgate Hill were to burst and bury London in lava to-morrow, the newspapers would show no trace of the disaster except an account of it. That thought is fine, heroic, when an editor thinks of it.

And if an editor knows not peace, he knows power. In Fleet Street, as in other streets, the population divides itself into those who want

something and those who have something to bestow; those who are anxious to give a lunch, and those who deign occasionally to accept a lunch; those who have an axe to grind and those who possess the grindstone. The change from the one position to the other was for me at first rather disconcerting; I could not understand it; there was an apparent unreality about it; I thought I must be mistaken; I said to myself: "Surely this unusual ingratiating affability has nothing to do with the accident that I am an editor." Then, like the rest of the owners of grindstones, I grew accustomed to the ownership, and cynical withal, cold, suspicious, and forbidding. I became bored by the excessive complaisance that had once tickled and flattered me. (Nevertheless, after I had ceased to be an editor I missed it; involuntarily I continued to expect it.) The situation of the editor of a ladies' paper is piquantly complicated, in this respect, by the fact that some women, not many—but a few, have an extraordinary belief in, and make unscrupulous use of, their feminine fascinations. The art of being "nice to editors" is diligently practised by these few; often, I know, with brilliant results. Sometimes I have sat in my office, with the charmer

opposite, and sardonically reflected: "You think I am revolving round your little finger, madam, but you were never more mistaken in your life." And yet, breathes there the man with soul so uniformly cold that once or twice in such circumstances the woman was not right after all? I cannot tell. The whole subject, the subject of that strange, disturbing, distracting, emotional atmosphere of femininity which surrounds the male in command of a group of more or less talented women, is of a supreme delicacy. It could only be treated safely in a novel—one of the novels which it is my fixed intention never to write. This I know and affirm, that the average woman-journalist is the most loyal, earnest, and teachable person under the sun. I begin to feel sentimental when I think of her astounding earnestness, even in grasping the live coal of English syntax. Syntax, bane of writing-women, I have spent scores of ineffectual hours in trying to inoculate the ungrammatical sex against your terrors! And how seriously they frowned, and how seriously I talked; and all the while the eternal mystery of the origin and destiny of all life lay thick and unnoticed about us!

These syntax-sittings led indirectly to a new

development of my activities. One day a man called on me with a letter of introduction. He was a colonial of literary tastes. I asked in what manner I might serve him.

"I want to know whether you would care to teach me journalism," he said.

"Teach you journalism!" I echoed, wondering by what unperceived alchemy I myself, but yesterday a tyro, had been metamorphosed into a professor of the most comprehensive of all crafts.

"I am told you are the best person to come to," he said.

"Why not?" I thought. "Why shouldn't I?" I have never refused work when the pay has been good. I named a fee that might have frightened him, but it did not. And so it fell out that I taught journalism to him, and to others, for a year or two. This vocation suited me; I had an aptitude for it; and my fame spread abroad. Some of the greatest experts in London complimented me on my methods and my results. Other and more ambitious schemes, however, induced me to abandon this lucrative field, which was threatening to grow tiresome.

XI

I COME now to a question only less delicate than that of the conflict of sexes in journalism—the question of reviewing, which, however, I shall treat with more freedom. If I have an aptitude for anything at all in letters, it is for criticism. Whenever I read a work of imagination, I am instantly filled with ideas concerning it; I form definite views about its merit or demerit, and having formed them, I hold those views with strong conviction. Denial of them rouses me; I must thump the table in support of them; I must compel people to believe that what I say is true; I cannot argue without getting serious in spite of myself. In literature, but in nothing else, I am a propagandist; I am not content to keep my opinion and let others keep theirs. To have a worthless book in my house (save in the way of business), to know that any friend of mine is enjoying it, actually distresses me. That book must go, the pretensions of that book must be exposed, if I am to enjoy peace

of mind. Some may suspect that I am guilty here of the affectation of a pose. Really it is not so. I often say to myself, after the heat of an argument, a denunciation, or a defence: "What does it matter, fool? The great mundane movement will continue, the terrestrial ball will roll on." But will it? Something must matter, after all, or the mundane movement emphatically would not continue. And the triumph of a good book, and the ignominy of a bad book, matter to me.

The criticism of imaginative prose literature, which is my speciality, is an over-crowded and not very remunerative field of activity. Every intelligent mediocrity in Fleet Street thinks he can appraise a novel, and most of them, judging from the papers, seem to make the attempt. And so quite naturally the pay is as a rule contemptible. To enter this field, therefore, with the intention of tilling it to a profitable fiscal harvest is an enterprise in the nature of a forlorn hope. I undertook it in innocence and high spirits, from a profound instinct. I had something to say. Of late years I have come to the conclusion that the chief characteristic of all bad reviewing is the absence of genuine conviction, of a message,

of a clear doctrine; the incompetent reviewer has to invent his opinions.

I succeeded at first by dint of ignoring one of the elementary laws of journalism, to-wit, that editors do not accept reviews from casual outsiders. I wrote a short review of a French work and sent it to "The Illustrated London News," always distinguished for its sound literary criticism. Any expert would have told me that I was wasting labour and postage. Nevertheless the review was accepted, printed, and handsomely paid for. I then sent a review of a new edition of Edward Carpenter's "Towards Democracy" to an evening paper, and this, too, achieved publicity. After that, for some months, I made no progress. And then I had the chance of a literary *causerie* in a weekly paper: eight hundred words a week, thirty pounds a year. I wrote a sample article—and I well remember the incredible pains I took to show that Mrs. Lynn Linton's "In Haste and at Leisure" was thoroughly bad —but my article was too "literary." The editor with thirty pounds a year to spend on literary criticism went in search of a confection less austere than mine. But I was not baulked for long. The literary column of my own paper (of which

I was then only assistant-editor) was presented to me on my assurance that I could liven it up: seven hundred words a week, at twelve and sixpence. The stuff that I wrote was entirely unsuited to the taste of our public; but it attracted attention from the seats of the mighty, and it also attracted—final triumph of the despised reviewer!—publishers' advertisements. I wrote this column every week for some years. And I got another one to do, by asking for it. Then I selected some of my best and wittiest reviews, and sent them to the editor of a well-known organ of culture with a note suggesting that my pen ought to add to the charms of his paper. An editor of sagacity and perspicacity, he admitted the soundness of my suggestion without cavil, and the result was mutually satisfactory. At the present time * I am continually refusing critical work. I reckon that on an average I review a book and a fraction of a book every day of my life, Sundays included.

"Then," says the man in the street inevitably, "you must spend a very large part of each day in reading new books." Not so. I fit my reviewing into the odd unoccupied corners of my

* 1900.

time, the main portions of which are given to the manufacture of novels, plays, short stories, and longer literary essays. I am an author of several sorts. I have various strings to my bow. And I know my business. I write half a million words a year. That is not excessive; but it is passable industry, and nowadays I make a point of not working too hard. The half million words contain one or two books, one or two plays, and numerous trifles not connected with literary criticism; only about a hundred and fifty thousand words are left for reviewing.

The sense of justice of the man in the street is revolted. "You do not read through all the books that you pretend to criticize?" he hints. I have never known a reviewer to answer this insinuation straightforwardly in print, but I will answer it: No, I do not.

And the man in the street says, shocked: "You are unjust."

And I reply: "Not at all. I am merely an expert."

The performances of the expert in any craft will surprise and amaze the inexpert. Come with me into my study and I will surprise and amaze you. Have I been handling novels for bread-

and-cheese all these years and not learnt to judge them by any process quicker than that employed by you who merely pick up a novel for relaxation after dinner? Assuming that your taste is fairly sound, let us be confronted with the same new novel, and I will show you, though you are a quick reader, that I can anticipate your judgment of that novel by a minimum of fifty-five minutes. The title-page—that conjunction of the title, the name of the author, and the name of the publisher—speaks to me, telling me all sorts of things. The very chapter-headings deliver a message of style. The narrative everywhere discloses to me the merits and defects of the writer; no author ever lived who could write a page without giving himself away. The whole book, open it where I will, is murmurous with indications for me. In the case of nine books of ten, to read them through would be not a work of supererogation—it would be a sinful waste of time on the part of a professional reviewer. The majority of novels—and all these remarks apply only to novels—hold no surprise for the professional reviewer. He can foretell them as the nautical almanac foretells astronomical phenomena. The customary established popular author seldom or never de-

viates from his appointed track, and it is the customary established popular author upon whom chiefly the reviewer is a parasite. New authors occasionally cause the reviewer to hesitate in his swift verdicts, especially when the verdict is inclined to be favourable. Certain publishers (that is to say, their "readers") have a knack of acquiring new authors who can imitate real excellence in an astonishing manner. In some cases the reviewer must needs deliberately "get into" the book, in order not to be deceived by appearances, in order to decide positively whether the author has genuine imaginative power, and if so, whether that power is capable of a sustained effort. But these difficult instances are rare. There remains the work of the true artist, the work that the reviewer himself admires and enjoys: say one book in fifty, or one in a hundred. The reviewer reads that through.

Brief reflection will convince any one that it would be economically impossible for the reviewer to fulfil this extraordinary behest of the man of the street to read every book through. Take your London morning paper, and observe the column devoted to fiction of the day. It comprises some fifteen hundred words, and the re-

viewer receives, if he is well paid, three guineas for it. Five novels are discussed. Those novels will amount to sixteen hundred pages of printed matter. Reading at the rate of eight words a second, the reviewer would accomplish two pages a minute, and sixteen hundred pages in thirteen hours and twenty minutes. Add an hour and forty minutes for the composition, and we have fifteen hours, or two days' work. Do you imagine that the reviewer of a London morning paper is going to hire out his immortal soul, his experience, his mere skill, at the rate of thirty-one and sixpence per day on irregular jobs? Scarcely. He will earn his three guineas inside three hours, and it will be well and truly earned. As a journeyman author, with the ability and inclination to turn my pen in any direction at request, I long ago established a rule never to work for less than ten shillings an hour on piece-work. If an editor commissioned an article, he received from me as much fundamental brain-power and as much time as the article demanded —up to the limit of his pay in terms of hours at ten shillings apiece. But each year I raise my price per hour. Of course, when I am working on my own initiative, for the sole advancement

of my artistic reputation, I ignore finance and think of glory alone. It cannot, however, be too clearly understood that the professional author, the man who depends entirely on his pen for the continuance of breath, and whose income is at the mercy of an illness or a headache, is eternally compromising between glory and something more edible and warmer at nights. He labours in the first place for food, shelter, tailors, a woman, European travel, horses, stalls at the opera, good cigars, ambrosial evenings in restaurants; and he gives glory the best chance he can. I am not speaking of geniuses with a mania for posterity; I am speaking of human beings.

To return and to conclude this chapter. I feel convinced—nay, I know—that on the whole novelists get a little more than justice at the hands of their critics. I can recall many instances in which my praise has, in the light of further consideration, exceeded the deserts of a book; but very, very few in which I have cast a slur on genuine merit. Critics usually display a tendency towards a too generous kindness, particularly Scottish reviewers; it is almost a rule of the vocation. Most authors, I think, recognize this pleasing fact. It is only the minority,

rabid for everlasting laudation, who carp; and, carping, demand the scalps of multiple-reviewers as a terrible example and warning to the smaller fry.

XII

SERIAL fiction is sold and bought just like any other fancy goods. It has its wholesale houses, its commercial travellers—even its trusts and "corners." An editor may for some reason desire the work of a particular author; he may dangle gold before that author or that author's agent; but if a corner has been established he will be met by polite regrets and the information that Mr. So-and-So, or the Such-and-Such Syndicate, is the proper quarter to apply to; then the editor is aware that he will get what he wants solely by one method of payment —through the nose. A considerable part of the fiction business is in the hand of a few large syndicates—syndicates in name only, and middlemen in fact. They perform a useful function. They will sell to the editor the entire rights of a serial, or they will sell him the rights for a particular district—the London district, the Manchester district, the John-o'-Groats district —the price varying in direct ratio with the size

of the district. Many London papers are content to buy the London rights only of a serial, or to buy the English rights as distinct from the Scottish rights, or to buy the entire rights minus the rights of one or two large provincial districts. Thus a serial may make its original appearance in London only; or it may appear simultaneously in London and Manchester only, or in London only in England and throughout Scotland, or in fifty places at once in England and Scotland. And after a serial has appeared for the first time and run its course, the weeklies of small and obscure towns, the proud organs of all the little Pedlingtons, buy for a trifle the right to reprint it. The serials of some authors survive in this manner for years in the remote provinces; pick up the local sheet in a country inn, and you may perhaps shudder again over the excitations of a serial that you read in book form in the far-off nineties. So, all editorial purses are suited, the syndicates reap much profit, and they are in a position to pay their authors, both tame and wild, a just emolument; upon occasion they can even be generous to the verge of an imprudence.

When I was an editor, I found it convenient, economical, and satisfactory to buy all my fiction

from a large and powerful syndicate. I got important "names," the names that one sees on the title-pages of railway novels, at a moderate price, and it was nothing to me that my serial was appearing also in Killicrankie, the Knockmilly-down Mountains, or the Scilly Isles. The representative of the syndicate, a man clothed with authority, called regularly; he displayed his dainty novelties, his leading lines, his old favourites, his rising stars, his dark horses, and his dead bargains; I turned them over, like a woman on remnant-day at a draper's; and after the inevitable Oriental chaffering, we came to terms. I bought Christmas stories in March, and seaside fiction in December, and good solid Baring-Gould or Le Queux or L. T. Meade all the year round.

Excellently as these ingenious narrative confections served their purpose, I dreamed of something better. And in my dream a sudden and beautiful thought accosted me: Why should all the buying be on one side?

And the next time the representative of the syndicate called upon me, I met his overtures with another.

"Why should all the buying be on one side?"

I said. "You know I am an author." I added that if he had not seen any of my books, I must send him copies. They were exquisitely different from his wares, but I said nothing about that.

"Ah!" he parried firmly. "We never buy serials from editors."

I perceived that I was by no means the first astute editor who had tried to mingle one sort of business with another. Still it was plain to me that my good friend was finding it a little difficult to combine the affability of a seller with the lofty disinclination of one who is requested to buy in a crowded market.

"I should have thought," I remarked, with a diplomatic touch of annoyance, "that you would buy wherever you could get good stuff."

"Oh, yes," he said, "of course we do. But——"

"Well," I continued, "I am writing a serial, and I can tell you it will be a good one. I merely mention it to you. If you don't care for it, I fancy I can discover some one who will."

Then, having caused to float between us, cloud-like, the significance of the indisputable fact that there were other syndicates in the world, I proceeded nonchalantly to the matter of his visit and

gave him a good order. He was an able merchant, but I had not moved in legal circles for nothing. Business is business: and he as well as I knew that arbitrary rules to the exclusion of editors must give way before this great and sublime truth, the foundation of England's glory.

The next thing was to concoct the serial. I had entered into a compact with myself that I would never "write down" to the public in a long fiction. I was almost bound to pander to the vulgar taste, or at any rate to a taste not refined, in my editing, in my articles, and in my short stories, but I had sworn solemnly that I would keep the novel-form unsullied for the pure exercise of the artist in me. What became of this high compact? I merely ignored it. I tore it up and it was forgotten, the instant I saw a chance of earning the money of shame. I devised excuses, of course. I said that my drawing-room wanted new furniture; I said that I might lift the sensational serial to a higher place, thus serving the cause of art; I said—I don't know what I said, all to my conscience. But I began the serial.

As an editor, I knew the qualities that a serial ought to possess. And I knew specially that

what most serials lacked was a large, central, unifying, vivifying idea. I was very fortunate in lighting upon such an idea for my first serial. There are no original themes; probably no writer ever did invent an original theme; but my theme was a brilliant imposture of originality. It had, too, grandeur and passion, and fantasy, and it was inimical to none of the prejudices of the serial reader. In truth it was a theme worthy of much better treatment than I accorded to it. Throughout the composition of the tale, until nearly the end, I had the uneasy feeling, familiar to all writers, that I was frittering away a really good thing. But as the climax approached, the situa- took hold of me, and in spite of myself I wrote my best. The tale was divided into twelve instalments of five thousand words each, and I composed it in twenty-four half-days. Each morning, as I walked down the Thames Embankment, I contrived a chapter of two thousand five hundred words, and each afternoon I wrote the chapter. An instinctive sense of form helped me to plan the events into an imposing shape, and it needed no abnormal inventive faculty to provide a thrill for the conclusion of each section. Further, I was careful to begin the story on the first

page, without preliminaries, and to finish it abruptly when it was finished. For the rest, I put in generous quantities of wealth, luxury, feminine beauty, surprise, catastrophe, and genial, incurable optimism. I was as satisfied with the result as I had been with the famous poem on Courage. I felt sure that the syndicate had never supplied me with a sensational serial half as good as mine, and I could conceive no plea upon which they would be justified in refusing mine.

They bought it. We had a difference concerning the price. They offered sixty pounds; I thought I might as well as not try to get a hundred, but when I had lifted them up to seventy-five, the force of bluff would no further go, and the bargain was closed. I saw that by writing serials I could earn three guineas per half-day; I saw myself embarking upon a life of what Ebenezer Jones called "sensation and event"; I saw my prices increasing, even to three hundred pounds for a sixty thousand word yarn—my imagination stopped there.

The lingering remains of an artistic conscience prompted me to sign this eye-smiting work with a pseudonym. The syndicate, since my name was quite unknown in their world, made no ob-

jection, and I invented several aliases, none of which they liked. Then a friend presented me with a gorgeous pseudonym—"Sampson Death." Surely, I thought, the syndicate will appreciate the subtle power of that! But no! They averred that their readers would be depressed by Sampson Death at the head of every instalment.

"Why not sign your own name?" they suggested.

And I signed my own name. I, apprentice of Flaubert et Cie., stood forth to the universe as a sensation-monger.

The syndicate stated that they would like to have the refusal of another serial from my pen.

In correcting the proofs of the first one, I perceived all the opportunities I had missed in it, and I had visions of a sensational serial absolutely sublime in those qualities that should characterize a sensational serial. I knew all about Eugène Sue, and something about Wilkie Collins; but my ecstatic contemplation of an ideal serial soared far beyond these. I imagined a serial decked with the profuse ornament of an Eastern princess, a serial at once grandiose and witty, at once modern and transcendental, a serial of which the interest should gradually

close on the reader like a vice until it became intolerable. I saw the whole of London preoccupied with this serial instead of with cricket and politics. I heard the dandiacal City youths discussing in first-class compartments on the Underground what would happen next in it. I witnessed a riot in Fleet Street because I had, accidentally on purpose, delayed my copy for twenty-four hours, and the editor of the "Daily ——" had been compelled to come out with an apology. Lastly, I heard the sigh of relief exhaled to heaven by a whole people, when in the final instalment I solved the mystery, untied the knot, relieved the cruel suspense.

Such was my dream—a dream that I never realized, but which I believe to be capable of realization. It is decades since even a second-class imaginative genius devoted itself entirely to the cult of the literary *frisson*. Sue excited a nation by admirable sensationalism. The feat might be accomplished again, and in this era so prolific in Napoleons of the press, it seems strange that no Napoleon has been able to organize the sensational serial on a Napoleonic scale.

I did not realize my dream, but I was in-

spired by it. Once more I received from the gods a plot scintillating with possibilities. It was less fine than the previous one; it was of the earth earthly; but it began with a scene quite unique in the annals of syndicates, and by this time I knew a little better how to keep the fire burning. I lavished wit and style on the thing, and there is no material splendour of modern life that I left out. I plunged into it with all my energy and enthusiasm, and wrote the fifteen instalments in fifteen days; I tried to feel as much like Dumas *père* as I could. But when I had done I felt, physically, rather more like the fragile Shelley or some wan curate than Dumas. I was a wreck.

The syndicate were willing to buy this serial, but they offered me no increase of rates. I declined to accept the old terms, and then the syndicate invited me to lunch. I made one of the greatest financial mistakes of my life on that accurst day, and my only excuse is that I was unaccustomed to being invited out to lunch by syndicates. I ought to have known, with all my boasted knowledge of the world of business, that syndicates do not invite almost unknown authors to lunch without excellent reason. I

had refused the syndicate's offer, and the syndicate asked me to name a price for the entire rights of my tale. I named a price; it was a good price for me, then; but the words were scarcely out of my mouth before I saw that I had blundered. Too late! My terms were quietly accepted. Let me cast no slightest aspersion upon the methods of the syndicate: the bargain was completed before lunch had commenced.

The syndicate disposed of the whole first serial rights of my tale to a well-known London weekly. The proprietors of the paper engaged a first-class artist to illustrate it, they issued a special circular about it, they advertised it every week on 800 railway stations. The editor of the paper wrote me an extremely appreciative letter as to the effect of the serial from his point of view. The syndicate informed a friend of mine that it was the best serial they had ever had. After running in London it overran the provincial press like a locust-swarm. It was, in a word, a boom. It came out in volume form, and immediately went into a second edition; it still sells. It was the first of my books that "The Times" ever condescended to review; the "Spec-

tator" took it seriously in a column and a quarter; and my friends took it seriously. I even received cables from foreign lands with offers to buy translation rights. I became known as the author of that serial. And all this, save for an insignificant trifle, to the profit of an exceedingly astute syndicate!

Subsequently I wrote other serials, but never again with the same verve. I found an outlet for my energies more amusing and more remunerative than the concoction of serials; and I am a serialist no longer.

XIII

WHILE yet an assistant-editor, I became a dramatic critic through the unwillingness of my chief to attend a theatrical matinée performance given by some forlorn little society, now defunct, for the rejuvenation of the English drama. My notice of the performance amused him, and soon afterwards he suggested that I should do our dramatic column in his stead. Behold me a "first-nighter"! When, with my best possible air of nonchalance and custom, I sauntered into my stall on a Lyceum first night, I glanced at the first rows of the pit with cold and aloof disdain. "Don't you wish you were me?" I thought behind that supercilious mask. "You have stood for hours imprisoned between parallel iron railings. Many times I have stood with you. But never again, miserable pittites!" Nevertheless I was by no means comfortable in my stall. Around me were dozens of famous or notorious faces, the leading representatives of

all that is glittering and factitious in the city of wealth, pleasure, and smartness. And everybody seemed to know everybody else. I alone seemed to be left out in the cold. My exasperated self-conscious fancy perceived in every haughty stare the enquiry: "Who is this whipper-snapper in the dress-suit that obviously cost four guineas in Cheapside?" I knew not a soul in that brilliant resort. During the intervals I went into the *foyer* and listened to the phrases which the critics tossed to each other over their liqueur-glasses. Never was such a genial confusion of "Old Chap," "Old Man," "Old Boy," "Dear Old Pal"! "Are they all blood-brothers?" I asked myself. The banality, the perfect lack of any sort of aesthetic culture, which characterized their remarks on the piece, astounded me. I said arrogantly: "If I don't know more about the art of the theatre than the whole crowd of you put together, I will go out and hang myself." Yet I was unspeakably proud to be among them. In a corner I caught sight of a renowned novelist whose work I respected. None noticed him, and he looked rather sorry for himself. "You and I . . . !" I thought. I had not attended many

first nights before I discovered that the handful of theatrical critics whose articles it is possible to read without fatigue, made a point of never leaving their stalls. They were nobody's old chap, and nobody's old pal. I copied their behaviour.

First on my own paper, and subsequently on two others, I practised dramatic criticism for five or six years. Although I threw it up in the end mainly from sheer lassitude, I enjoyed the work. It means late nights, and late nights are perdition; but there is a meretricious glamour about it that attracts the foolish moth in me, and this I am bound to admit. My trifling influence over the public was decidedly on the side of the angels. I gradually found that I possessed a coherent theory of the drama, definite critical standards, and all the rest of the apparatus; in short, that I had something to say. And my verdicts had a satisfactory habit of coinciding with those of the two foremost theatrical critics in London—perhaps in Europe (I need not name them). It is a somewhat strange fact that I made scarcely any friends in the theatre. After all those years of assiduous first-nighting, I was almost as solitary in the auditorium on

the evening when I bade a *blase* adieu to the critical bench as when I originally entered it. I fancied I had wasted my time and impaired my constitution in emulating the achievements of Théophile Gautier, Hazlitt, Francisque Sarcey and M. Jules Lemaître, to say nothing of Dutton Cook and Mr. Clement Scott. My health may have suffered; but, as it happened, I had not quite wasted my time.

"Why don't you write a play yourself?"

This blunt question was put to me by a friend, an amateur actor, whom I had asked to get up some little piece or other for an entertainment in the Theatre Royal back-drawing-room of my house.

"Quite out of my line," I replied, and I was absolutely sincere. I had no notion whatever of writing for the stage. I felt sure that I had not the aptitude.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "It's as easy as falling off a log."

We argued, and I was on the point of refusing the suggestion, when the spirit of wild adventure overcame me, and I gravely promised my friend that I would compose a duologue if he and his wife would promise to perform it at my

party. The affair was arranged. I went to bed with the conviction that in the near future I stood a fair chance of looking an ass. However, I met with what I thought to be an amusing idea for a curtain-raiser the next morning, and in the afternoon I wrote the piece complete. I enjoyed writing it, and as I read it aloud to myself I laughed at it. I discovered that I had violated the great canon of dramatic art,—Never keep your audience in the dark, and this troubled me (Paul Hervieu had not then demonstrated by his "L'Enigme" that that canon may be broken with impunity); but I could not be at the trouble of reconstructing the whole play for the sake of an Aristotelian maxim. I at once posted the original draft to my friend with this note: "Dear ——, Here is the play which last night I undertook to write for you."

The piece was admirably rendered to an audience of some thirty immortal souls—of course very sympathetic immortal souls. My feelings, as the situation which I had invented gradually developed into something alive on that tiny make-shift stage, were peculiar and, in a way, alarming. Every one who has driven a motor-car knows the uncanny sensation that

ensues when for the first time in your life you pull the starting lever, and the Thing beneath you begins mysteriously and formidably to move. It is at once an astonishment, a terror, and a delight. I felt like that as I watched the progress of my first play. It was as though I had unwittingly liberated an energy greater than I knew, actually created something vital. This illusion of physical vitality is the exclusive possession of the dramatist; the novelist, the poet, cannot share it. The play was a delicious success. People laughed so much that some of my most subtle jocosities were drowned in the appreciative cachinnation. The final applause was memorable, at any rate to me. No mere good-nature can simulate the unique ring of genuine applause, and this applause was genuine. It was a microscopic triumph for me, but it was a triumph. Every one said to me: "But you are a dramatist!" "Oh, no!" I replied awkwardly; "this trifle is really nothing." But the still small voice of my vigorous self-confidence said: "Yes, you are, and you ought to have found it out years ago!" Among my audience was a publisher. He invited me to write for him a little book of one-act farces for amateurs;

his terms were agreeable. I wrote three such farces, giving two days to each, and the volume was duly published; no book of mine has cost me less trouble. The reviews of it were lavish in praise of my "unfailing wit"; the circulation was mediocre. I was asked by companies of amateur actors up and down the country to assist at rehearsals of these pieces; but I could never find the energy to comply, save once. I hankered after the professional stage. By this time I could see that I was bound to enter seriously into the manufacture of stage-plays. My readers will have observed that once again in my history the inducement to embark for a fresh port had been quite external and adventitious.

I had a young friend with an extraordinary turn for brilliant epigram and an equally extraordinary gift for the devising of massive themes. He showed me one day the manuscript of a play. My faith in my instinct for form, whether in drama or fiction, was complete, and I saw instantly that what this piece lacked was form, which means intelligibility. It had everything except intelligibility. "Look here!" I said to him, "we will write a play together,

you and I. We can do something that will knock spots off——" etc., etc. We determined upon a grand drawing-room melodrama which should unite style with those qualities that make for financial success on the British stage. In a few days my friend produced a list of about a dozen "ideas" for the piece. I chose the two largest and amalgamated them. In the confection of the plot, and also throughout the entire process of manufacture, my experience as a dramatic critic proved valuable. I believe my friend had only seen two plays in his life. We accomplished our first act in a month or so, and when this was done and the scenario of the other three written out, we informed each other that the stuff was exceedingly good.

Part of my share in the play was to sell it. I knew but one man of any importance in the theatrical world; he gave me an introduction to the manager of a West End theatre second to none in prestige and wealth. The introduction had weight; the manager intimated by letter that his sole object in life was to serve me, and in the meantime he suggested an appointment. I called one night with our first act and the scenario, and amid the luxuriousness

of the managerial room, the aroma of coffee, the odour of Turkish cigarettes, I explained to that manager the true greatness of our play. I have never been treated with a more distinguished politeness; I might have been Victorien Sardou, or Ibsen . . . (no, not Ibsen). In quite a few days the manager telephoned to my office and asked me to call the same evening. He had read the manuscript; he thought very highly of it, very highly. "But——" Woe! Desolation! Dissipation of airy castles! It was preposterous on our part to expect that our first play should be commissioned by a leading theatre. But indeed we had expected this miracle. The fatal "But" arose from a difficulty of casting the principal part; so the manager told me. He was again remarkably courteous, and he assuaged the rigour of his refusal by informing me that he was really in need of a curtain-raiser with a part for a certain actress of his company; he fancied that we could supply him with the desired *bibelot;* but he wanted it at once, within a week. Within a week my partner and I had each written a one-act play, and in less than a fortnight I received a third invitation to discuss coffee, Turkish

cigarettes, and plays. The manager began to talk about the play which was under my own signature.

"Now, what is your idea of terms?" he said, walking to and fro.

"Can it be true," I thought, "that I have actually sold a play to this famous manager?" In a moment my simple old ambitions burst like a Roman candle into innumerable bright stars. I had been content hitherto with the prospect of some fame, a thousand a year, and a few modest luxuries. But I knew what the earnings of successful dramatists were. My thousand increased tenfold; my mind dwelt on all the complex sybaritism of European capitals; and I saw how I could make use of the unequalled advertisement of theatrical renown to find a ready market for the most artistic fiction that I was capable of writing. This new scheme of things sprang into my brain instantaneously, full-grown.

I left the theatre an accepted dramatist.

It never rains but it pours. My kind manager mentioned our stylistic drawing-room melodrama to another manager with such laudation that the second manager was eager to see it.

Having seen it, he was eager to buy it. He gave us a hundred down to finish it in three months, and when we had finished it he sealed a contract for production with another cheque for a hundred. At the same period, through the mediation of the friend who had first introduced me to this world where hundreds were thrown about like fivers, I was commissioned by the most powerful theatrical manager on earth to assist in the dramatization of a successful novel; and this led to another commission of a similar nature, on more remunerative terms. Then a certain management telegraphed for me (in the theatre all business is done by telegraph and cable), and offered me a commission to compress a five-act Old English comedy into three acts.

"We might have offered this to So-and-So or So-and-So," they said, designating persons of importance. "But we preferred to come to you."

"I assume my name is to appear?" I said.

But my name was not to appear, and I begged to be allowed to decline the work.

I suddenly found myself on terms of familiarity with some of the great ones of the stage.

I found myself invited into the Garrick Club, and into the more Bohemian atmosphere of the Green Room Club. I became accustomed to hearing the phrase: "You are the dramatist of the future." One afternoon I was walking down Bedford Street when a hand was placed on my shoulder, and a voice noted for its rich and beautiful quality exclaimed: "How the d——l are you, my dear chap?" The speaker bears a name famous throughout the English-speaking world.

"You are arriving!" I said to myself, naïvely proud of this greeting. I had always understood that the theatrical "ring" was impenetrable to an outsider; and yet I had stepped into the very middle of it without the least trouble.

My collaborator and I then wrote a farce. "We can't expect to sell everything," I said to him warningly, but I sold it quite easily. Indeed I sold it, repurchased it, and sold it again, within the space of three months.

Reasons of discretion prevent me from carrying my theatrical record beyond this point.

I have not spoken of the artistic side of this play-concoction, because it scarcely has any. My aim in writing plays, whether alone or in

collaboration, has always been strictly commercial.* I wanted money in heaps, and I wanted advertisement for my books. Here and there, in the comedies and farces in which I have been concerned, a little genuine dramatic art has, I fancy, been introduced; but surreptitiously, and quite unknown to the managers. I have never boasted of it in managerial apartments. That I have amused myself while constructing these arabesques of intrigue and epigram is indubitable, whether to my credit or discredit as a serious person. I laugh constantly in writing a farce. I have found it far easier to compose a commercial play than an artistic novel. How our princes of the dramatic kingdom can contrive to spend two years over a single piece, as they say they do, I cannot imagine. The average play contains from eighteen to twenty thousand words; the average novel contains eighty thousand; after all, writing is a question of words. At the rate of a thousand words a day, one could write a play three times over in a couple of months; prefix a month—thirty solid days of old Time!—for the perfecting of the plot, and you will be able to calculate the

* Once more written in 1900.

number of plays producible by an expert craftsman in a year. And unsuccessful plays are decidedly more remunerative than many successful novels. I am quite certain that the vast majority of failures produced in the West End mean to their authors a minimum remuneration of ten pounds per thousand words. In the fiction-mart ten pounds per thousand is gilded opulence. I am neither Sardou, Sudermann, nor George R. Sims, but I know what I am talking about, and I say that dramatic composition for the market is child's play compared to the writing of decent average fiction—provided one has an instinct for stage effect.

XIV

IT cuts me to the heart to compare English with American publishers to the disadvantage, however slight, of the former; but the exigencies of a truthful narrative demand from me this sacrifice of personal feeling to the god in "the sleeping-car emblematic of British enterprise." The representative of a great American firm came over to England on a mission to cultivate personal relations with authors of repute and profitableness. Among other documents of a similar nature, he had an introduction to myself; I was not an author of repute and profitableness, but I was decidedly in the movement and a useful sort of person to know. We met and became friends, this ambassador and I; he liked my work, a sure avenue to my esteem; I liked his genial shrewdness. Shortly afterwards, there appeared in a certain paper an unsigned article dealing, in a broad survey alleged to be masterly, with the evolution of the literary market during the last thirty

years. My American publisher read the article—he read everything—and, immediately deciding in his own mind that I was the author of it, he wrote me an enthusiastic letter of appreciation. He had not been deceived; I was the author of the article. Within the next few days it happened that he encountered an English publisher who complained that he could not find a satisfactory "reader." He informed the English publisher of my existence, referred eulogistically to my article, and gave his opinion that I was precisely the man whom the English publisher needed. The English publisher had never heard of me (I do not blame him, I merely record), but he was so moved by the American's oration that he invited me to lunch at his club. I lunched at his club, in a discreet street off Piccadilly (an aged and a sound wine!), and after lunch, my host drew me out to talk at large on the subject of authors, publishers, and cash, and the interplay of these three. I talked. I talked for a very long while, enjoying it. The experience was a new one for me. The publisher did not agree with all that I said, but he agreed with a good deal of it, and at the close of the somewhat exhausting

assize, in which between us we had judged the value of nearly every literary reputation in England, he offered me the post of principal reader to his firm, and I accepted it.

It is, I believe, an historical fact that authors seldom attend the funeral of a publisher's reader. They approve the sepulture, but do not, save sometimes in a spirit of ferocious humour, lend to the procession the dignity of their massive figures. Nevertheless, the publisher's reader is the most benevolent person on earth. He is so perforce. He may begin his labours in the slaughterous vein of the "Saturday Review"; but time and the extraordinary level mediocrity of manuscripts soon cure him of any such tendency. He comes to refuse but remains to accept. He must accept something—or where is the justification of his existence? Often, after a prolonged run of bad manuscripts, I have said to myself: "If I don't get a chance to recommend something soon I shall be asked to resign." I long to look on a manuscript and say that it is good, or that there are golden sovereigns between the lines. Instead of searching for faults I search for hidden excellences. No author ever had a more lenient audience

than I. If the author would only believe it, I want, I actually desire, to be favourably impressed by his work. When I open the parcel of typescript I beam on it with kindly eyes, and I think: "Perhaps there is something really good here"; and in that state of mind I commence the perusal. But there never is anything really good there. In an experience not vast, but extending over some years, only one book with even a touch of genius has passed through my hands; that book was so faulty and so wilfully wild, that I could not unreservedly advise its publication and my firm declined it; I do not think that the book has been issued elsewhere. I have "discovered" only two authors of talent; one of these is very slowly achieving a reputation; of the other I have heard nothing since his first book, which resulted in a financial loss. Time and increasing knowledge of the two facts have dissipated for me the melancholy and affecting legend of literary talent going a-begging because of the indifference of publishers. O young author of talent, would that I could find you and make you understand how the publisher yearns for you as the lover for his love! *Qua* publisher's reader, I am a

sad man, a man confirmed in disappointment, a man in whom the phenomenon of continued hope is almost irrational. When I look back along the frightful vista of dull manuscripts that I have refused or accepted, I tremble for the future of English literature (or should tremble, did I not infallibly know that the future of English literature is perfectly safe after all)! And yet I have by no means drunk the worst of the cup of mediocrity. The watery milk of the manuscripts sent to my employer has always been skimmed for me by others; I have had only the cream to savour. I am asked sometimes why publishers publish so many bad books; and my reply is: "Because they can't get better." And this is a profound truth solemnly enunciated.

People have said to me: *"But you are so critical; you condemn everything."* Such is the complaint of the laity against the initiate, against the person who has diligently practised the cultivation of his taste. And, roughly speaking, it is a well-founded and excusable complaint. The person of fine taste does condemn nearly everything. He takes his pleasure in a number of books so limited as to be al-

most nothing in comparison with the total mass of production. Out of two thousand novels issued in a year, he may really enjoy half-a-dozen at the outside. And the one thousand nine hundred and ninety-four he lumps together in a wholesale contempt which draws no distinctions. This is right. This contributes to the preservation of a high standard. But the laity will never be persuaded that it is just. The point I wish to make, however, is that when I sit down to read for my publisher I first of all forget my literary exclusiveness. I sink the aesthetic aristocrat and become a plain man. By a deliberate act of imagination, I put myself in the place, not of the typical average reader —for there is no such person—but of a composite of the various *genera* of average reader known to publishing science. I *am* that composite for the time; and, being so, I remain quiescent and allow the book to produce its own effect on me. I employ no canons, rules, measures. Does the book bore me—that condemns it. Does it interest me, ever so slightly —that is enough to entitle it to further consideration. When I have decided that it interests the imaginary composite whom I represent, then

I become myself again, and proceed scientifically to enquire why it has interested, and why it has not interested more intensely; I proceed to catalogue its good and bad qualities, to calculate its chances, to assay its monetary worth.

The first gift of a publisher's reader should be imagination; without imagination, the power to put himself in a position in which actually he is not, fine taste is useless—indeed, it is worse than useless. The ideal publisher's reader should have two perfections—perfect taste and perfect knowledge of what the various kinds of other people deem to be taste. Such qualifications, even in a form far from perfect, are rare. A man is born with them; though they may be cultivated, they cannot either of them be acquired. The remuneration of the publisher's reader ought, therefore, to be high, lavish, princely. It it not. It has nothing approaching these characteristics. Instead of being regarded as the ultimate seat of directing energy, the brain within the publisher's brain, the reader often exists as a sort of offshoot, an accident, an external mechanism which must be employed because it is the custom to employ it. As one reflects upon the experience and judgment which readers must

possess, the responsibility which weighs on them, and the brooding hypochondriasis engendered by their mysterious calling, one wonders that their salaries do not enable them to reside in Park Lane or Carlton House Terrace. The truth is, that they exist precariously in Walham Green, Camberwell, or out in the country where rents are low.

I have had no piquant adventures as a publisher's reader. The vocation fails in piquancy: that is precisely where it does fail. Occasionally when a manuscript comes from some established author who has been deemed the private property of another house, there is the excitement of discovering from the internal evidence of the manuscript, or from the circumstantial evidence of public facts carefully collated, just why that manuscript has been offered to my employer; and the discovered reason is always either amusing or shameful. But such excitements are rare, and not very thrilling after all. No! Reading for a publisher does not foster the joy of life. I have never done it with enthusiasm; and, frankly, I continue to do it more from habit than from inclination. One learns too much in the rôle. The gilt is off the

gingerbread, and the bloom is off the rye, for a publisher's reader. The statistics of circulations are before him; and no one who is aware of the actual figures which literary advertisements are notoriously designed to conceal can be called happy until he is dead.

XV

WHEN I had been in London a decade, I stood aside from myself and reviewed my situation with the godlike and detached impartiality of a trained artistic observer. And what I saw was a young man who pre-eminently knew his way about, and who was apt to be rather too complacent over this fact; a young man with some brilliance but far more shrewdness; a young man with a highly developed faculty for making a little go a long way; a young man who was accustomed to be listened to when he thought fit to speak, and who was decidedly more inclined to settle questions than to raise them.

This young man had invaded the town as a clerk at twenty-five shillings a week, paying six shillings a week for a bed-sitting room, threepence for his breakfast, and sixpence for his vegetarian dinner. The curtain falls on the prologue. Ten years elapse. The curtain rises on the figure of an editor, novelist, dramatist,

critic, connoisseur of all arts. See him in his suburban residence, with its poplar-shaded garden, its bicycle-house at the extremity thereof, and its horizon composed of the District Railway Line. See the study, lined with two thousand books, garnished with photogravures, and furnished with a writing-bureau and a chair and nothing else. See the drawing-room with its artistic wall-paper, its Kelmscotts, its water-colours of a pallid but indubitable distinction, its grand piano on which are a Wagnerian score and Bach's Two-part Inventions. See the bachelor's bedroom, so austere and precise, wherein Boswell's "Johnson" and Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal" exist peaceably together on the night-table. The entire machine speaks with one voice, and it tells you that there are no flies on that young man, that that young man never gives the wrong change. He is in the movement, he is correct; but at the same time he is not so simple as not to smile with contemptuous toleration at all movements and all correctness. He knows. He is a complete guide to art and life. His innocent foible is never to be at a loss, and never to be carried away—save now and then, because an occasional ecstasy is good for the soul. His

knowledge of the *coulisses* of the various arts is wonderful. He numbers painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, among his intimate friends; and no artistic manifestation can possibly occur that he is unable within twenty-four hours to assess at its true value. He is terrible against *cabotins*, no matter where he finds them, and this seems to be his hobby: to expose *cabotins*.

He is a young man of method; young men do not arrive without method at the condition of being encyclopædias; his watch is as correct as his judgments. He breakfasts at eight sharp, and his housekeeper sets the kitchen clock five minutes fast, for he is a terrible Ivan at breakfast. He glances at a couple of newspapers, first at the list of "publications received," and then at the news. Of course he is not hoodwinked by newspapers. He will meet the foreign editor of the "Daily ——" at lunch and will learn the true inwardness of that exploded *canard* from Berlin. Having assessed the newspapers, he may interpret to his own satisfaction a movement from a Mozart piano sonata, and then he will brush his hat, pick up sundry books, and pass sedately to the station. The station-master is respectfully cordial, and quite ready to explain to him

the secret causation of delays, for his season-ticket is a white one. He gets into a compartment with a stockbroker, a lawyer, or a tea-merchant, and immediately falls to work; he does his minor reviewing in the train, fostering or annihilating reputations while the antique engine burrows beneath the squares of the West End; but his brain is not so fully occupied that he cannot spare a corner of it to meditate upon the extraordinary ignorance and simplicity of stockbrokers, lawyers, and tea-merchants. He reaches his office, and for two or three hours practises that occupation of watching other people work which is called editing: a process always of ordering, of rectifying, of laying down the law, of being looked up to, of showing how a thing ought to be done and can be done, of being flattered and cajoled, of dispensing joy or gloom—in short, the Jupiter and Shah of Persia business. He then departs, as to church, to his grill-room, where for a few moments himself and the cook hold an anxious consultation to decide which particular chop or which particular steak out of a mass of chops and steaks shall have the honour of sustaining him till tea-time. The place is full of literary shahs and those about to

be shahs. They are all in the movement; they constitute the movement. They ride the comic-opera whirlwinds of public opinion and direct the tea-cup storms of popularity. The young man classes most of them with the stockbroker, the lawyer, and the tea-merchant. With a few he fraternises, and these few save their faces by appreciating the humour of the thing. Soon afterwards he goes home, digging *en route* the graves of more reputations, and, surrounded by the two thousand volumes, he works in seclusion at his various activities that he may triumph openly. He descends to dinner stating that he has written so many thousand words, and excellent words too—stylistic, dramatic, tender, witty. There may be a theatrical first-night toward, in which case he returns to town and sits in the seat of the languid for a space. Or he stays within doors and discusses with excessively sophisticated friends the longevity of illusions in ordinary people. At length he retires and reads himself to sleep. His last thoughts are the long, long thoughts of his perfect taste and tireless industry, and of the aesthetic darkness which covers the earth. . . .

Such was the young man I inimically beheld.

And I was not satisfied with him. He was gorgeous, but not sufficiently gorgeous. He had done much in ten years, and I excused his facile pride, but he had not done enough. The curtain had risen on the first act of the drama of life, but the action, the intrigue, the passion seemed to hesitate and halt. Was this the artistic and creative life, this daily round? Was this the reality of that which I had dreamed? Where was the sense of romance, the consciousness of felicity? I felt that I had slipped into a groove which wore deeper every day. It seemed to me that I was fettered and tied down. I had grown weary of journalism. The necessity of being at a certain place at a certain hour on so many days of the week grew irksome to me; I regarded it as invasive of my rights as a freeborn Englishman, as shameful and scarcely tolerable. Was I a horse that I should be ridden on the curb by a Board of Directors? I objected to the theory of proprietors. The occasional conferences with the Board, though conducted with all the ritual of an extreme punctilio, were an indignity. The suave requests of the chairman: "Will you kindly tell us——?" And my defensive replies, and then the dismissal:

"Thank you, Mr.——, I think we need trouble you no further this morning." And my exit, irritated by the thought that I was about to be discussed with the freedom that Boards in conclave permit themselves. It was as bad as being bullied by London University at an examination. I longed to tell this Board, with whom I was so amicable on unofficial occasions, that they were using a razor to cut firewood. I longed to tell them that the nursing of their excellent and precious organ was seriously interfering with the composition of great works and the manufacture of a dazzling reputation. I longed to point out to them that the time would come when they would mention to their friends with elaborate casualness and covert pride that they had once employed me, the unique me, at a salary measurable in hundreds.

Further, I was ill-pleased with literary London. "You have a literary life here," an American editor once said to me. "There is a literary circle, an atmosphere. . . . We have no such thing in New York." I answered that no doubt we had; but I spoke without enthusiasm. I suppose that if any one "moved in literary circles," I did, then. Yet I derived small satis-

faction from my inclusion within those circumferences. To me there was a lack of ozone in the atmosphere which the American editor found so invigorating. Be it understood that when I say "literary circles," I do not in the least mean genteel Bohemia, the world of informal At-Homes that are all formality, where the little lions growl on their chains in a row against a drawing-room wall, and the hostess congratulates herself that every single captive in the salon has "done something." Such polite racketting, such discreet orgies of the higher intellectuality, may suit the elegant triflers, the authors of monographs on Velasquez, golf, Dante, asparagus, royalties, ping-pong, and Empire; but the business men who write from ten to fifty thousands words a week without chattering about it, have no use for the literary menagerie. I lived among the real business men —and even so I was dissatisfied. I believe too that they were dissatisfied, most of them. There is an infection in the air of London, a zymotic influence which is the mysterious cause of unnaturalness, pose, affectation, artificiality, moral neuritis, and satiety. One loses grasp of the essentials in an undue preoccupation with the

vacuities which society has invented. The distractions are too multiform. One never gets a chance to talk common-sense with one's soul.

Thirdly, the rate at which I was making headway did not please me. My reputation was growing, but only like a coral-reef. Many people had an eye on me, as on one for whom the future held big things. Many people took care to read almost all that I wrote. But my name had no significance for the general public. The mention of my name would have brought no recognizing smile to the average person who is "fond of reading." I wanted to do something large, arresting, and decisive. And I saw no chance of doing this. I had too many irons in the fire. I was frittering myself away in a multitude of diverse activities of the pen.

I pondered upon these considerations for a long while. I saw only one way out, and, at last, circumstances appearing to conspire to lead me into that way, I wrote a letter to my Board of Directors and resigned my editorial post. I had decided to abandon London, that delectable paradise of my youthful desires. A To-let notice flourished suddenly in my front-garden, and my world became aware that I was going to desert

it. The majority thought me rash and unwise, and predicted an ignominious return to Fleet Street. But the minority upheld my resolution. I reached down a map of England, and said that I must live on a certain main-line at a certain minimum distance from London. This fixed the neighbourhood of my future home. The next thing was to find that home, and with the aid of friends and a bicycle I soon found it. One fine wet day I stole out of London in a new quest of romance. No one seemed to be fundamentally disturbed over my exodus. I remarked to myself: "Either you are a far-seeing and bold fellow, or you are a fool. Time will show which." And that night I slept, or failed to sleep, in a house that was half a mile from the next house, three miles from a station, and three miles from a town. I had left the haunts of men with a vengeance, and incidentally I had left a regular income.

I ran over the list of our foremost writers: they nearly all lived in the country.

XVI

WHEN I had settled down into the landscape, bought my live-stock, studied manuals on horses, riding, driving, hunting, dogs, poultry, and wildflowers, learned to distinguish between wheat and barley and between a six-year-old and an aged screw, shot a sparrow on the fence only to find it was a redbreast, drunk the cherry-brandy of the Elizabethan inn, played in the village cricket team, and ceased to feel self-conscious in riding-breeches, I perceived with absolute certainty that I had made no error; I knew that, come poverty or the riches of Indian short stories, I should never again live permanently in London. I expanded, and in my expansion I felt rather sorry for Londoners. I perceived, too, that the country possessed commercial advantages which I had failed to appreciate before. When you live two and a half miles from a railway you can cut a dash on an income which in London spells omnibus instead of cab. For myself I have

a profound belief in the efficacy of cutting a dash. You invite an influential friend down for the week-end. You meet him at the station with a nice little grey mare in a phaeton, and an unimpeachable Dalmatian running behind. The turn-out is nothing alone, but the pedigree printed in the pinkiness of that dog's chaps and in the exiguity of his tail, spotted to the last inch, would give tone to a coster's cart. You see that your influential friend wishes to comment, but as you gather up the reins you carefully begin to talk about the weather and prices per thousand. You rush him home in twelve minutes, skimming gate posts. On Monday morning, purposely running it fine, you hurry him into a dog-cart behind a brown cob fresh from a pottle of beans, and you whirl him back to the station in ten minutes, up-hill half the way. You fling him into the train, with ten seconds to spare. "This is how we do it in these parts," your studiously nonchalant face says to him. He thinks. In a few hours Fleet Street becomes aware that young So-and-so, who lately buried himself in the country, is alive and lusty. Your stock rises. You go up one. You extort respect. You are ticketed in the retentive

brains of literary shahs as a success. And you still have the dog left for another day.

In the country there is plenty of space and plenty of time, and no damnable fixed relation between these two; in other words, a particular hour does not imply a particular spot for you, and this is something to an author. I found my days succeeding each other with a leisurely and adorable monotony. I lingered over breakfast like a lord, perusing the previous evening's papers with as much gusto as though they were hot from the press. I looked sideways at my work, with a non-committal air, as if saying: "I may do you or I may not. I shall see how I feel." I went out for a walk, followed by dogs less spectacular than the Dalmatian, to collect ideas. I had nothing to think about but my own direct productiveness. I stopped to examine the progress of trees, to discuss meteorology with roadmenders, to wonder why lambs always waggled their tails during the act of taking sustenance. All was calmness, serenity. The embryo of the article or the chapter faintly adumbrated itself in my mind, assumed a form. One idea, then another; then an altercation with the dogs, ending in castigation, disillusion, and

pessimism for them. Suddenly I exclaimed: "I think I've got enough to go on with!" And I turned back homewards. I reached my study and sat down. From my windows I beheld a magnificent panorama of hills. Now the contemplation of hills is uplifting to the soul; it leads to inspiration and induces nobility of character, but it has a tendency to interfere with actual composition. I stared long at those hills. Should I work, should I not work? A brief period always ensued when the odds were tremendous against any work being done that day. Then I seized the pen and wrote the title. Then another dreadful and disconcerting pause, all ideas having scuttled away like mice to their holes. Well, I must put something down, however ridiculous. I wrote a sentence, feeling first that it would not serve and then that it would have to serve, anyway. I glanced at the clock. Ten twenty-five! I watched the clock in a sort of hypnotism that authors know of, till it showed ten-thirty. Then with a horrible wrench I put the pen in the ink again .... Jove! Eleven forty-five, and I had written seven hundred words. Not bad stuff that! Indeed, very good! Time for a cigarette and a stroll round

to hear wisdom from the gardener. I resumed at twelve, and then in about two minutes it was one o'clock and lunch time. After lunch, rest for the weary and the digesting; slumber; another stroll. Arrival of the second post on a Russian pony that cost fifty shillings. Tea, and perusal of the morning paper. Then another spell of work, and the day was gone, vanished, distilled away. And about five days made a week, and forty-eight weeks a year.

No newspaper-proprietors, contributors, circulations, placards, tape-machines, theatres, operas, concerts, picture-galleries, clubs, restaurants, parties, Undergrounds! Nothing artificial, except myself and my work! And nothing, save the fear of rent-day, to come between myself and my work!

It was dull, you will tell me. But I tell you it was magnificent. Monotony, solitude, are essential to the full activity of the artist. Just as a horse is seen best when coursing alone over a great plain, so the fierce and callous egotism of the artist comes to its perfection in a vast expanse of custom, leisure, and apparently vacuous reverie. To insist on forgetting his work, to keep his mind a blank until the work, no

longer to be held in check, rushes into that emptiness and fills it up—that is one of the secrets of imaginative creation. Of course it is not a recipe for every artist. I have known artists, and genuine ones, who could keep their minds empty and suck in the beauty of the world for evermore without the slightest difficulty; who only wrote, as the early Britons hunted, when they were hungry and there was nothing in the pot. But I was not of that species. On the contrary, the incurable habit of industry, the itch for the pen, was my chiefest curse. To be unproductive for more than a couple of days or so was to be miserable. Like most writers I was frequently the victim of an illogical, indefensible and causeless melancholy; but one kind of melancholy could always be explained, and that was the melancholy of idleness. I could never divert myself with hobbies. I did not read much, except in the way of business. Two hours reading, even of Turgenev or Balzac or Montaigne, wearied me out. An author once remarked to me: *"I know enough. I don't read books, I write 'em."* It was a haughty and arrogant saying, but there is a sense in which it was true. Often I have felt like that: "I know

enough, I feel enough. If my future is as long as my past, I shall still not be able to put down the tenth part of what I have already acquired." The consciousness of this, of what an extraordinary and wonderful museum of perceptions and emotions my brain was, sustained me many a time against the chagrins, the delays, and the defeats of the artistic career. Often have I said inwardly: "World, when I talk with you, dine with you, wrangle with you, love you, and hate you, I condescend!" Every artist has said that. People call it conceit; people may call it what they please. One of the greatest things a great man said, is:—

I know I am august.
I do not trouble my spirit to indicate itself or to be understood. . . .
I exist as I am, that is enough.
If no other in the world be aware I sit content.
And if each and all be aware I sit content.

Nevertheless, for me, the contentment of the ultimate line surpassed the contentment of the penultimate. And therefore it was, perhaps, that I descended on London from time to time like a wolf on the fold, and made the world aware, and snatched its feverish joys for a space, and

then, surfeited and advertised, went back and relapsed into my long monotony. And sometimes I would suddenly halt and address myself:

"You may be richer or you may be poorer; you may live in greater pomp and luxury, or in less. The point is that you will always be, essentially, what you are now. You have no real satisfaction to look forward to except the satisfaction of continually inventing, fancying, imagining, scribbling. Say another thirty years of these emotional ingenuities, these interminable variations on the theme of beauty. Is it good enough?"

And I answered: Yes.

But who knows? Who can preclude the regrets of the dying couch?

THE END

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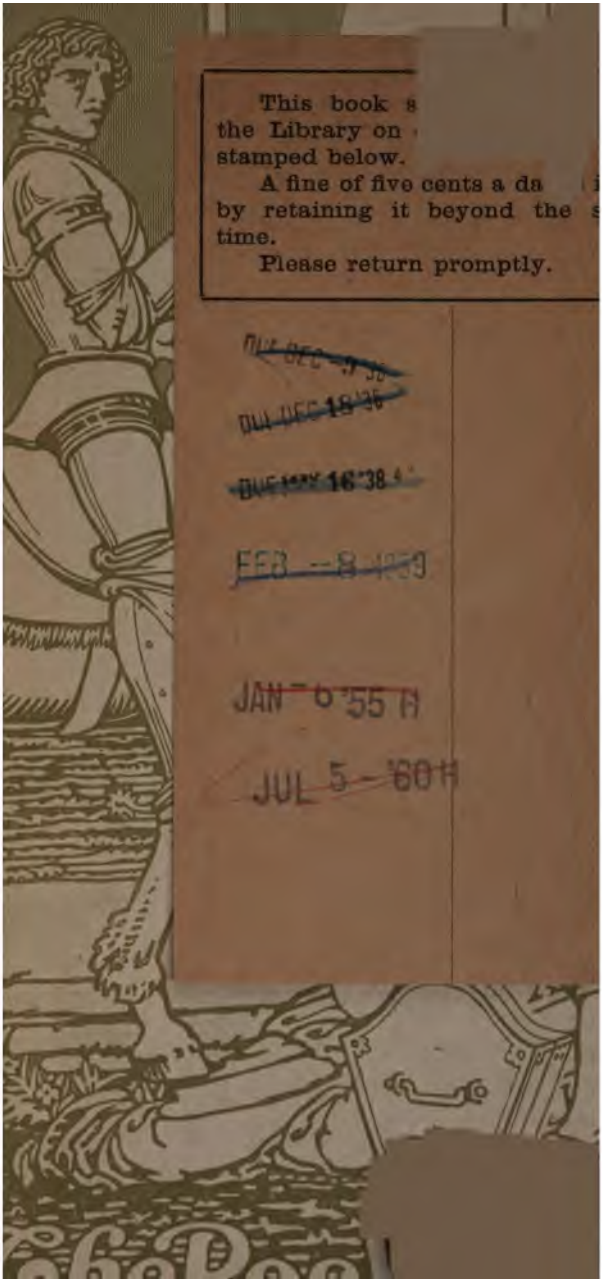

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